

EX LIBRIS.

W. T. ANNAN.

Short Stories
of To-day and Yesterday

BRET HARTE

SHORT STORIES *of*
TO-DAY & YESTERDAY

First Volumes

ARNOLD BENNETT
G. K. CHESTERTON
BARRY PAIN
W. W. JACOBS
MORLEY ROBERTS
GEORGE GISSING
ARTHUR MORRISON
BRET HARTE
GUY DE MAUPASSANT
ANTHONY TROLLOPE

Short Stories
of To-day & Yesterday

BRET HARTE



GEORGE G. HARRAP & CO. LTD.
LONDON BOMBAY SYDNEY

Published 1928
by GEORGE G. HARRAP & Co. LTD.
39-41 Parker Street, Kingsway, London, W.C.2

Printed in Great Britain at THE BALLANTYNE PRESS by
SPOTTISWOODE, BALLANTYNE & Co. LTD.
Colchester, London & Eton

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

LIKE many another writer of repute Bret Harte had, in his time, played many parts. By turns he had tried his hand at being a schoolmaster, a miner, a compositor, a journalist, and a lecturer, and these diverse occupations gave him abundant opportunities for gathering the raw material of experience which he was to weave so successfully into his stories. The short story represents America's most significant contribution to world-literature, and a marked feature of the American short story is what we know as local colour. The short-story writer concentrates upon a single effect, and if he is master of his business he makes every detail minister, either directly or by contrast, to that effect. Where the effect is in the setting—that is to say, where the story is placed so inextricably in a certain milieu that we could not conceive it as happening elsewhere—then we get local colour. The importance of the American work in this kind is generally appreciated, but it is not always recognized that it was Bret Harte who pointed the way. *The Blue Grass and the Middle South, the Corn Belt and the Wheat Belt, the Cattle Country and the Old West*—all these have interpreters in plenty. We are apt, however, to forget that it was the appearance of "*The Luck of Roaring Camp*" in 1870 which began a movement that revealed America, first to herself, and then to all the world outside.

The East suddenly awoke to the fact of the West. In those simple and moving stories of Bret Harte it recognized those elemental feelings by virtue of which Mr. John Oakhurst, the gambler, was no alien, but sworn brother of the deacon of the straitest New

England meeting-house. By realizing its wonderful diversity America began to achieve unity. The Wall Street financier had to see the differences between the Californian miner and himself before he could arrive at the deeper truth that fundamentally they were the same. So was begun that beneficent movement toward unity and understanding the importance of which it is impossible to exaggerate. Just as Addison in England in the eighteenth century helped to heal the breach between the city merchant and the country squire, so Bret Harte in America in the nineteenth century performed the greater task of helping New England to understand California, and for this service we can never be too grateful. His was one of the most potent influences in American literature, and, despite certain exaggerations, it was a very healthy influence.

Francis Bret Harte was born at Albany, N.Y., in the year 1839. In 1868 he founded a magazine named "The Overland Monthly," in which many of his own stories appeared. He was appointed consul at Glasgow in 1880. Finally he went to London, where he remained to the time of his death in 1902.

F. H. P.

CONTENTS

THE LUCK OF ROARING CAMP	<i>Page</i> 1
THE OUTCASTS OF POKER FLAT	15
MIGGLES	30
TENNESSEE'S PARTNER	45
THE IDYL OF RED GULCH	58
BROWN OF CALAVERAS	71
THE MAN OF NO ACCOUNT	85
MLISS	91
THE ROMANCE OF MADROÑO HOLLOW	125
HOW SANTA CLAUS CAME TO SIMPSON'S BAR	140
THE ILIAD OF SANDY BAR	159
A MONTE FLAT PASTORAL	174
MR. THOMPSON'S PRODIGAL	195
THE POET OF SIERRA FLAT	205

THE LUCK OF ROARING CAMP

THERE was commotion in Roaring Camp. It could not have been a fight, for in 1850 that was not novel enough to have called together the entire settlement. The ditches and claims were not only deserted, but "Tuttle's grocery" had contributed its gamblers, who, it will be remembered, calmly continued their game the day that French Pete and Kanaka Joe shot each other to death over the bar in the front room. The whole camp was collected before a rude cabin on the outer edge of the clearing. Conversation was carried on in a low tone, but the name of a woman was frequently repeated. It was a name familiar enough in the camp,— "Cherokee Sal."

Perhaps the less said of her the better. She was a coarse, and, it is to be feared, a very sinful woman. But at that time she was the only woman in Roaring Camp, and was just then lying in sore extremity, when she most needed the administration of her own sex. Dissolute, abandoned, and irreclaimable, she was yet suffering a martyrdom hard enough to bear even when veiled by sympathizing womanhood, but now terrible in her loneliness. The primal curse had come to her in that original isolation which must have made the punishment of the first transgression so dreadful. It was, perhaps, part of the expiation of her sin, that, at a moment when she most lacked her sex's intuitive tenderness and care, she met only the half-contemptuous faces of her masculine associates. Yet a few of the spectators were, I think, touched by her sufferings. Sandy Tipton thought it was "Rough on Sal," and, in the contemplation of her condition, for a moment rose superior to the fact that he had an ace and two bowers in his sleeve.

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

It will be seen, also, that the situation was novel. Deaths were by no means uncommon in Roaring Camp, but a birth was a new thing. People had been dismissed the camp effectively, finally, and with no possibility of return; but this was the first time that anybody had been introduced *ab initio*. Hence the excitement.

"You go in there, Stumpy," said a prominent citizen known as "Kentuck," addressing one of the loungers. "Go in there, and see what you kin do. You've had experience in them things."

Perhaps there was a fitness in the selection. Stumpy, in other climes, had been the putative head of two families; in fact, it was owing to some legal informality in these proceedings that Roaring Camp—a city of refuge—was indebted to his company. The crowd approved the choice, and Stumpy was wise enough to bow to the majority. The door closed on the extempore surgeon and midwife, and Roaring Camp sat down outside, smoked its pipe, and awaited the issue.

The assemblage numbered about a hundred men. One or two of these were actual fugitives from justice, some were criminal and all were reckless. Physically, they exhibited no indication of their past lives and character. The greatest scamp had a Raphael face, with a profusion of blonde hair; Oakhurst, a gambler, had the melancholy air and intellectual abstraction of a Hamlet; the coolest and most courageous man was scarcely over five feet in height, with a soft voice and an embarrassed, timid manner. The term "roughs" applied to them was a distinction rather than a definition. Perhaps in the minor details of fingers, toes, ears, etc., the camp may have been deficient, but these slight omissions did not detract from their aggregate force.

THE LUCK OF ROARING CAMP

The strongest man had but three fingers on his right hand ; the best shot had but one eye.

Such was the physical aspect of the men that were dispersed around the cabin. The camp lay in a triangular valley, between two hills and a river. The only outlet was a steep trail over the summit of a hill that faced the cabin, now illuminated by the rising moon. The suffering woman might have seen it from the rude bunk whereon she lay—seen it winding like a silver thread until it was lost in the stars above.

A fire of withered pine-boughs added sociability to the gathering. By degrees the natural levity of Roaring Camp returned. Bets were freely offered and taken regarding the result. Three to five that "Sal would get through with it"; even, that the child would survive; side bets as to the sex and complexion of the coming stranger. In the midst of an excited discussion an exclamation came from those nearest the door, and the camp stopped to listen. Above the swaying and moaning of the pines, the swift rush of the river, and the crackling of the fire, rose a sharp, querulous cry—a cry unlike anything heard before in the camp. The pines stopped moaning, the river ceased to rush, and the fire to crackle. It seemed as if Nature had stopped to listen too.

The camp rose to its feet as one man ! It was proposed to explode a barrel of gunpowder, but, in consideration of the situation of the mother, better counsels prevailed, and only a few revolvers were discharged ; for, whether owing to the rude surgery of the camp, or some other reason, Cherokee Sal was sinking fast. Within an hour she had climbed, as it were, that rugged road that led to the stars, and so passed out of Roaring Camp, its sin and

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

shame, for ever. I do not think that the announcement disturbed them much, except in speculation as to the fate of the child. "Can he live now?" was asked of Stumpy. The answer was doubtful. The only other being of Cherokee Sal's sex and maternal condition in the settlement was an ass. There was some conjecture as to fitness, but the experiment was tried. It was less problematical than the ancient treatment of Romulus and Remus, and apparently as successful.

When these details were completed, which exhausted another hour, the door was opened, and the anxious crowd of men who had already formed themselves into a queue, entered in single file. Beside the low bunk or shell, on which the figure of the mother was starkly outlined below the blankets stood a pine table. On this a candle-box was placed, and within it, swathed in staring red flannel, lay the last arrival at Roaring Camp. Beside the candle-box was placed a hat. Its use was soon indicated. "Gentlemen," said Stumpy, with a singular mixture of authority and *ex officio* complacency,—“Gentlemen will please pass in at the front door, round the table, and out at the back door. Them as wishes to contribute anything toward the orphan will find a hat handy.” The first man entered with his hat on; he uncovered, however, as he looked about him, and so, unconsciously, set an example to the next. In such communities good and bad actions are catching. As the procession filed in, comments were audible—criticisms addressed, perhaps, rather to Stumpy, in the character of showman—“Is that him?” “mighty small specimen”; “hasn't mor'n got the colour”; “ain't bigger nor a derringer.” The contributions were as characteristic: A silver tobacco-box; a doubloon;

THE LUCK OF ROARING CAMP

a navy revolver, silver mounted ; a gold specimen ; a very beautifully embroidered lady's handkerchief (from Oakhurst the gambler) ; a diamond breastpin ; a diamond ring (suggested by the pin, with the remark from the giver that he "saw that pin and went two diamonds better") ; a slung shot ; a Bible (contributor not detected) ; a golden spur ; a silver teaspoon (the initials, I regret to say, were not the giver's) ; a pair of surgeon's shears ; a lancet ; a Bank of England note for £5 ; and about \$200 in loose gold and silver coin. During these proceedings Stumpy maintained a silence as impassive as the dead on his left, a gravity as inscrutable as that of the newly born on his right. Only one incident occurred to break the monotony of the curious procession. As Kentuck bent over the candle-box half curiously, the child turned, and, in a spasm of pain, caught at his groping finger, and held it fast for a moment. Kentuck looked foolish and embarrassed. Something like a blush tried to assert itself in his weather-beaten cheek. "The d—d little cuss !" he said, as he extricated his finger, with, perhaps, more tenderness and care than he might have been deemed capable of showing. He held that finger a little apart from its fellows as he went out, and examined it curiously. The examination provoked the same original remark in regard to the child. In fact, he seemed to enjoy repeating it. "He rastled with my finger," he remarked to Tipton, holding up the member, "the d—d little cuss !"

It was four o'clock before the camp sought repose. A light burnt in the cabin where the watchers sat, for Stumpy did not go to bed that night. Nor did Kentuck. He drank quite freely, and related with great gusto his experience, invariably ending with his characteristic condemnation of the new-

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE 'TALES

comer. It seemed to relieve him of any unjust implication of sentiment, and Kentuck had the weaknesses of the nobler sex. When everybody else had gone to bed, he walked down to the river, and whistled reflectingly. Then he walked up the gulch, past the cabin, still whistling with demonstrative unconcern. At a large red-wood tree he paused and retraced his steps, and again passed the cabin. Half-way down to the river's bank he again paused, and then returned and knocked at the door. It was opened by Stumpy. "How goes it?" said Kentuck, looking past Stumpy toward the candle-box. "All serene," replied Stumpy. "Anything up?" "Nothing." There was a pause—an embarrassing one—Stumpy still holding the door. Then Kentuck had recourse to his finger, which he held up to Stumpy. "Rastled with it—the d—d little cuss," he said, and retired.

The next day Cherokee Sal had such rude sepulture as Roaring Camp afforded. After her body had been committed to the hillside, there was a formal meeting of the camp to discuss what should be done with her infant. A resolution to adopt it was unanimous and enthusiastic. But an animated discussion in regard to the manner and feasibility of providing for its wants at once sprung up. It was remarkable that the argument partook of none of those fierce personalities with which discussions were usually conducted at Roaring Camp. Tipton proposed that they should send the child to Red Dog, a distance of forty miles—where female attention could be procured. But the unlucky suggestion met with fierce and unanimous opposition. It was evident that no plan which entailed parting from their new acquisition would for a moment be entertained. "Besides," said Tom Ryder, "them fellows at Red Dog would

THE LUCK OF ROARING CAMP

swap it, and ring in somebody else on us." A disbelief in the honesty of other camps prevailed at Roaring Camp as in other places.

The introduction of a female nurse in the camp also met with objection. It was argued that no decent woman could be prevailed to accept Roaring Camp as her home, and the speaker urged that "they didn't want any more of the other kind." This unkind allusion to the defunct mother, harsh as it may seem, was the first spasm of propriety—the first symptom of the camp's regeneration. Stumpy advanced nothing. Perhaps he felt a certain delicacy in interfering with the selection of a possible successor in office. But when questioned, he averred stoutly that he and "Jinny"—the mammal before alluded to—could manage to rear the child. There was something original, independent, and heroic about the plan that pleased the camp. Stumpy was retained. Certain articles were sent for to Sacramento. "Mind," said the treasurer, as he pressed a bag of gold dust into the expressman's hand, "the best that can be got—lace, you know, and filigree-work and frills,—d—m the cost!"

Strange to say, the child thrived. Perhaps the invigorating climate of the mountain camp was compensation for material deficiencies. Nature took the foundling to her broader breast. In that rare atmosphere of the Sierra foothills—that air pungent with balsamic odour, that ethereal cordial at once bracing and exhilarating—he may have found food and nourishment, or a subtle chemistry that transmuted asses' milk to lime and phosphorus. Stumpy inclined to the belief that it was the latter and good nursing. "Me and that ass," he would say, "has been father and mother to him! Don't you," he would add,

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

apostrophizing the helpless bundle before him, "never go back on us."

By the time he was a month old, the necessity of giving him a name became apparent. He had generally been known as "the Kid," "Stumpy's boy," "the Cayote" (an allusion to his vocal powers), and even by Kentuck's endearing diminutive of "the d—d little cuss." But these were felt to be vague and unsatisfactory, and were at last dismissed under another influence. Gamblers and adventurers are generally superstitious, and Oakhurst one day declared that the baby had brought "the luck" to Roaring Camp. It was certain that of late they had been successful. "Luck" was the name agreed upon, with the prefix of Tommy for greater convenience. No allusion was made to the mother, and the father was unknown. "It's better," said the philosophical Oakhurst, "to take a fresh deal all round. Call him Luck, and start him fair." A day was accordingly set apart for the christening. What was meant by this ceremony the reader may imagine, who has already gathered some idea of the reckless irreverence of Roaring Camp. The master of ceremonies was one "Boston," a noted wag, and the occasion seemed to promise the greatest facetiousness. This ingenious satirist had spent two days in preparing a burlesque of the church service, with pointed local allusions. The choir was properly trained, and Sandy Tipton was to stand godfather. But after the procession had marched to the grove with music and banners, and the child had been deposited before a mock altar, Stumpy stepped before the expectant crowd. "It ain't my style to spoil fun, boys," said the little man, stoutly, eyeing the faces around him, "but it strikes me that this thing ain't exactly on the squar. It's playing it

THE LUCK OF ROARING CAMP

pretty low down on this yer baby to ring in fun on him that he ain't going to understand. And ef there's going to be any godfathers round, I'd like to see who's got any better rights than me." A silence followed Stumpy's speech. To the credit of all humorists be it said, that the first man to acknowledge its justice was the satirist, thus stopped of his fun. "But," said Stumpy, quickly, following up his advantage. "we're here for a christening, and we'll have it. I proclaim you Thomas Luck, according to the laws of the United States and the State of California, so help me God." It was the first time that the name of the Deity had been uttered otherwise than profanely in the camp. The form of christening was perhaps even more ludicrous than the satirist had conceived; but, strangely enough, nobody saw it and nobody laughed. "Tommy" was christened as seriously as he would have been under a Christian roof, and cried and was comforted in as orthodox fashion.

And so the work of regeneration began in Roaring Camp. Almost imperceptibly a change came over the settlement. The cabin assigned to "Tommy Luck"—or "The Luck," as he was more frequently called—first showed signs of improvement. It was kept scrupulously clean and whitewashed. Then it was boarded, clothed, and papered. The rose-wood cradle—packed eighty miles by mule—had, in Stumpy's way of putting it, "sorter killed the rest of the furniture." So the rehabilitation of the cabin became a necessity. The men who were in the habit of lounging in at Stumpy's to see "how The Luck got on" seemed to appreciate the change, and, in self-defence, the rival establishment of "Tuttle's grocery" bestirred itself, and imported a carpet and mirrors. The reflections of the latter

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

on the appearance of Roaring Camp tended to produce stricter habits of personal cleanliness. Again, Stumpy imposed a kind of quarantine upon those who aspired to the honour and privilege of holding "The Luck." It was a cruel mortification to Kentuck—who, in the carelessness of a large nature and the habits of frontier life, had begun to regard all garments as a second cuticle, which, like a snake's, only sloughed off through decay—to be debarred this privilege from certain prudential reasons. Yet such was the subtle influence of innovation that he thereafter appeared regularly every afternoon in a clean shirt, and face still shining from his ablutions. Nor were moral and social sanitary laws neglected. "Tommy," who was supposed to spend his whole existence in a persistent attempt to repose, must not be disturbed by noise. The shouting and yelling which had gained the camp its infelicitous title were not permitted within hearing distance of Stumpy's. The men conversed in whispers, or smoked with Indian gravity. Profanity was tacitly given up in these sacred precincts, and throughout the camp a popular form of expletive, known as "D—n the luck!" and "Curse the luck!" was abandoned, as having a new personal bearing. Vocal music was not interdicted, being supposed to have a soothing, tranquillizing quality, and one song, sung by "Man-o'-War Jack," an English sailor, from her Majesty's Australian colonies, was quite popular as a lullaby. It was a lugubrious recital of the exploits of "the Arethusa, Seventy-four," in a muffled minor, ending with a prolonged dying fall at the burden of each verse, "On b-o-o-o-ard of the Arethusa." It was a fine sight to see Jack holding The Luck, rocking from side to side as if with the motion of a ship, and

THE LUCK OF ROARING CAMP

crooning forth this naval ditty. Either through the peculiar rocking of Jack or the length of his song—it contained ninety stanzas, and was continued with conscientious deliberation to the bitter end—the lullaby generally had the desired effect. At such times the men would lie at full length under the trees, in the soft summer twilight, smoking their pipes and drinking in the melodious utterances. An indistinct idea that this was pastoral happiness pervaded the camp. “This ’ere kind o’ think,” said the Cockney Simmons, meditatively reclining on his elbow, “is ’evingly.” It reminded him of Greenwich.

On the long summer days The Luck was usually carried to the gulch, from whence the golden store of Roaring Camp was taken. There, on a blanket spread over pine-boughs, he would lie while the men were working in the ditches below. Latterly, there was a rude attempt to decorate this bower with flowers and sweet-smelling shrubs, and generally some one would bring him a cluster of wild honeysuckles, azaleas, or the painted blossoms of Las Mariposas. The men had suddenly awakened to the fact that there were beauty and significance in these trifles, which they had so long trodden carelessly beneath their feet. A flake of glittering mica, a fragment of variegated quartz, a bright pebble from the bed of the creek, became beautiful to eyes thus cleared and strengthened, and were invariably put aside for “The Luck.” It was wonderful how many treasures the woods and hillsides yielded that “would do for Tommy.” Surrounded by playthings such as never child out of fairy-land had before, it is to be hoped that Tommy was content. He appeared to be securely happy, albeit there was an infantine gravity about him, a contemplative light

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

in his round grey eyes, that sometimes worried Stumpy. He was always tractable and quiet, and it is recorded that once, having crept beyond his "corral"—a hedge of tessellated pine-boughs, which surrounded his bed—he dropped over the bank on his head in the soft earth, and remained with his mottled legs in the air in that position for at least five minutes with unflinching gravity. He was extricated without a murmur. I hesitate to record the many other instances of his sagacity, which rest, unfortunately, upon the statements of prejudiced friends. Some of them were not without a tinge of superstition. "I crep' up the bank just now," said Kentuck one day, in a breathless state of excitement, "and dern my skin if he wasn't a talking to a jay-bird as was sittin' on his lap. There they was, just as free and sociable as anything you please, a jawin' at each other just like two cherry-bums." Howbeit, whether creeping over the pine-boughs or lying lazily on his back blinking at the leaves above him, to him the birds sang, the squirrels chattered, and the flowers bloomed. Nature was his nurse and playfellow. For him she would let slip between the leaves golden shafts of sunlight that fell just within his grasp; she would send wandering breezes to visit him with the balm of bay and resinous gums; to him the tall red-woods nodded familiarly and sleepily, the bumble-bees buzzed, and the rooks cawed a slumbrous accompaniment.

Such was the golden summer of Roaring Camp. They were "flush times"—and the Luck was with them. The claims had yielded enormously. The camp was jealous of its privileges and looked suspiciously on strangers. No encouragement was given to immigration, and, to make their seclusion more perfect, the land on either side of the moun-

12

THE LUCK OF ROARING CAMP

tain wall that surrounded the camp they duly pre-empted. This, and a reputation for singular proficiency with the revolver, kept the reserve of Roaring Camp inviolate. The expressman—their only connecting link with the surrounding world—sometimes told wonderful stories of the camp. He would say, "They've a street up there in 'Roaring,' that would lay over any street in Red Dog. They've got vines and flowers round their houses, and they wash themselves twice a day. But they're mighty rough on strangers, and they worship an Ingin baby."

With the prosperity of the camp came a desire for further improvement. It was proposed to build a hotel in the following spring, and to invite one or two decent families to reside there for the sake of "The Luck"—who might perhaps profit by female companionship. The sacrifice that this concession to the sex cost these men, who were fiercely sceptical in regard to its general virtue and usefulness, can only be accounted for by their affection for Tommy. A few still held out. But the resolve could not be carried into effect for three months, and the minority meekly yielded in the hope that something might turn up to prevent it. And it did.

The winter of 1851 will long be remembered in the foothills. The snow lay deep on the Sierras, and every mountain creek became a river, and every river a lake. Each gorge and gulch was transformed into a tumultuous watercourse that descended the hillsides, tearing down giant trees and scattering its drift and débris along the plain. Red Dog had been twice under water, and Roaring Camp had been forewarned. "Water put the gold into them gulches," said Stumpy. "It's been here once and will be here again!" And that night the North Fork suddenly

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

leaped over its banks, and swept up the triangular valley of Roaring Camp.

In the confusion of rushing water, crushing trees, and crackling timber, and the darkness which seemed to flow with the water and blot out the fair valley, but little could be done to collect the scattered camp. When the morning broke, the cabin of Stumpy nearest the river bank was gone. Higher up the gulch they found the body of its unlucky owner; but the pride, the hope, the joy, the Luck, of Roaring Camp had disappeared. They were returning with sad hearts, when a shout from the bank recalled them.

„It was a relief-boat from down the river. They had picked up, they said, a man and an infant, nearly exhausted, about two miles below. Did anybody know them, and did they belong here?

It needed but a glance to show them Kentuck lying there, cruelly crushed and bruised, but still holding the Luck of Roaring Camp in his arms. As they bent over the strangely assorted pair, they saw that the child was cold and pulseless. "He is dead," said one. Kentuck opened his eyes. "Dead?" he repeated, feebly. "Yes, my man, and you are dying too." A smile lit the eyes of the expiring Kentuck. "Dying," he repeated, "he's a taking me with him—tell the boys I've got the Luck with me now"; and the strong man, clinging to the frail babe as a drowning man is said to cling to a straw, drifted away into the shadowy river that flows for ever to the unknown sea.

THE OUTCASTS OF POKER FLAT

AS Mr. John Oakhurst, gambler, stepped into the main street of Poker Flat on the morning of the twenty-third of November, 1850, he was conscious of a change in its moral atmosphere since the preceding night. Two or three men, conversing earnestly together, ceased as he approached, and exchanged significant glances. There was a Sabbath lull in the air, which, in a settlement unused to Sabbath influences, looked ominous.

Mr. Oakhurst's calm, handsome face betrayed small concern in these indications. Whether he was conscious of any predisposing cause was another question. "I reckon they're after somebody," he reflected; "likely it's me." He returned to his pocket the handkerchief with which he had been whipping away the red dust of Poker Flat from his neat boots, and quietly discharged his mind of any further conjecture.

In point of fact, Poker Flat was "after somebody." It had lately suffered the loss of several thousand dollars, two valuable horses, and a prominent citizen. It was experiencing a spasm of virtuous reaction, quite as lawless and ungovernable as any of the acts that had provoked it. A secret committee had determined to rid the town of all improper persons. This was done permanently in regard of two men who were then hanging from the boughs of a sycamore in the gulch, and temporarily in the banishment of certain other objectionable characters. I regret to say that some of these were ladies. It is but due to the sex, however, to state that their impropriety was professional, and it was only in such easily established standards

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

of evil that Poker Flat ventured to sit in judgment.

Mr. Oakhurst was right in supposing that he was included in this category. A few of the committee had urged hanging him as a possible example, and a sure method of reimbursing themselves from his pockets of the sums he had won from them. "It's agin justice," said Jim Wheeler, "to let this yer young man from Roaring Camp—an entire stranger—carry away our money." But a crude sentiment of equity residing in the breasts of those who had been fortunate enough to win from Mr. Oakhurst overruled this narrower local prejudice.

Mr. Oakhurst received his sentence with philosophic calmness, none the less coolly that he was aware of the hesitation of his judges. He was too much of a gambler not to accept Fate. With him, life was at best an uncertain game, and he recognized the usual percentage in favour of the dealer.

A body of armed men accompanied the deported wickedness of Poker Flat to the outskirts of the settlement. Besides Mr. Oakhurst, who was known to be a coolly desperate man, and for whose intimidation the armed escort was intended, the expatriated party consisted of a young woman, familiarly known as "The Duchess"; another, who had won the title of "Mother Shipton"; and "Uncle Billy," a suspected sluice-robber and confirmed drunkard. The cavalcade provoked no comments from the spectators, nor was any word uttered by the escort. Only when the gulch which marked the uttermost limit of Poker Flat was reached, the leader spoke briefly, and to the point. The exiles were forbidden to return, at the peril of their lives.

As the escort disappeared, their pent-up feelings found vent in a few hysterical tears from the

THE OUTCASTS OF POKER FLAT

Duchess, some bad language from Mother Shipton, and a Parthian volley of expletives from Uncle Billy. The philosophic Oakhurst alone remained silent. He listened calmly to Mother Shipton's desire to cut somebody's heart out, to the repeated statements of the Duchess that she would die in the road, and to the alarming oaths that seemed to be bumped out of Uncle Billy as he rode forward. With the easy good-humour characteristic of his class, he insisted upon exchanging his own riding-horse, "Five Spot," for the sorry mule which the Duchess rode. But even this act did not draw the party into any closer sympathy. The young woman re-adjusted her somewhat draggled plumes with a feeble, faded coquetry; Mother Shipton eyed the possessor of "Five Spot" with malevolence; and Uncle Billy included the whole party in one sweeping anathema.

The road to Sandy Bar—a camp that, not having as yet experienced the regenerating influences of Poker Flat, consequently seemed to offer some invitation to the emigrants—lay over a steep mountain range. It was distant a day's severe travel. In that advanced season, the party soon passed out of the moist, temperate regions of the foot-hills into the dry, cold, bracing air of the Sierras. The trail was narrow and difficult. At noon the Duchess, rolling out of her saddle upon the ground, declared her intention of going no farther, and the party halted.

The spot was singularly wild and impressive. A wooded amphitheatre, surrounded on three sides by precipitous cliffs of naked granite, sloped gently toward the crest of another precipice that overlooked the valley. It was, undoubtedly, the most suitable spot for a camp, had camping been advisable. But Mr. Oakhurst knew that scarcely

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

half the journey to Sandy Bar was accomplished, and the party were not equipped or provisioned for delay. This fact he pointed out to his companions curtly, with a philosophic commentary on the folly of "throwing up their hand before the game was played out." But they were furnished with liquor, which in this emergency stood them in place of food, fuel, rest, and prescience. In spite of his remonstrances, it was not long before they were more or less under its influence. Uncle Billy passed rapidly from a bellicose state into one of stupor, the Duchess became maudlin, and Mother Shipton snored. Mr. Oakhurst alone remained erect, leaning against a rock, calmly surveying them.

Mr. Oakhurst did not drink. It interfered with a profession which required coolness, impassiveness, and presence of mind, and, in his own language, he "couldn't afford it." As he gazed at his recumbent fellow-exiles, the loneliness begotten of his pariah-trade, his habits of life, his very vices, for the first time seriously oppressed him. He bestirred himself in dusting his black clothes, washing his hands and face, and other acts characteristic of his studiously neat habits, and for a moment forgot his annoyance. The thought of deserting his weaker and more pitiable companions never perhaps occurred to him. Yet he could not help feeling the want of that excitement which, singularly enough, was most conducive to that calm equanimity for which he was notorious. He looked at the gloomy walls that rose a thousand feet sheer above the circling pines around him; at the sky, ominously clouded; at the valley below, already deepening into shadow. And, doing so, suddenly he heard his own name called.

A horseman slowly ascended the trail. In the

THE OUTCASTS OF POKER FLAT

fresh, open face of the new-comer Mr. Oakhurst recognized Tom Simson, otherwise known as "The Innocent" of Sandy Bar. He had met him some months before over a "little game," and had, with perfect equanimity, won the entire fortune—amounting to some forty dollars—of that guileless youth. After the game was finished, Mr. Oakhurst drew the youthful speculator behind the door, and thus addressed him: "Tommy, you're a good little man, but you can't gamble worth a cent. Don't try it over again." He then handed him his money back, pushed him gently from the room, and so made a devoted slave of Tom Simson.

There was a remembrance of this in his boyish and enthusiastic greeting of Mr. Oakhurst. He had started, he said, to go to Poker Flat to seek his fortune. "Alone?" No, not exactly alone; in fact (a giggle), he had run away with Piney Woods. Didn't Mr. Oakhurst remember Piney? She that used to wait on the table at the Temperance House? They had been engaged a long time, but old Jake Woods had objected; and so they had run away, and were going to Poker Flat to be married, and here they were. And they were tired out, and how lucky it was they had found a place to camp and company. All this the Innocent delivered rapidly, while Piney, a stout, comely damsel of fifteen, emerged from behind the pine-tree where she had been blushing unseen, and rode to the side of her lover.

Mr. Oakhurst seldom troubled himself with sentiment, still less with propriety; but he had a vague idea that the situation was not fortunate. He retained, however, his presence of mind sufficiently to kick Uncle Billy, who was about to say something, and Uncle Billy was sober enough to recog-

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

nize in Mr. Oakhurst's kick a superior power that would not bear trifling. He then endeavoured to dissuade Tom Simson from delaying further, but in vain. He even pointed out the fact that there was no provision, nor means of making a camp. But, unluckily, the Innocent met this objection by assuring the party that he was provided with an extra mule loaded with provisions, and by the discovery of a rude attempt at a loghouse near the trail. "Piney can stay with Mrs. Oakhurst," said the Innocent, pointing to the Duchess, "and I can shift for myself."

Nothing but Mr. Oakhurst's admonishing foot saved Uncle Billy from bursting into a roar of laughter. As it was, he felt compelled to retire up the cañon until he could recover his gravity. There he confided the joke to the tall pine-trees, with many slaps of his leg, contortions of his face, and the usual profanity. But when he returned to the party, he found them seated by a fire—for the air had grown strangely chill and the sky overcast—in apparently amicable conversation. Piney was actually talking in an impulsive, girlish fashion to the Duchess, who was listening with an interest and animation she had not shown for many days. The Innocent was holding forth, apparently with equal effect, to Mr. Oakhurst and Mother Shipton, who was actually relaxing into amiability. "Is this yer a d—d picnic?" said Uncle Billy, with inward scorn, as he surveyed the sylvan group, the glancing firelight, and the tethered animals in the foreground. Suddenly an idea mingled with the alcoholic fumes that disturbed his brain. It was apparently of a jocular nature, for he felt impelled to slap his leg again and cram his fist into his mouth.

As the shadows crept slowly up the mountain, a

THE OUTCASTS OF POKER FLAT

slight breeze rocked the tops of the pine-trees, and moaned through their long and gloomy aisles. The ruined cabin, patched and covered with pine-boughs, was set apart for the ladies. As the lovers parted, they unaffectedly exchanged a kiss, so honest and sincere that it might have been heard above the swaying pines. The frail Duchess and the malevolent Mother Shipton were probably too stunned to remark upon this last evidence of simplicity, and so turned without a word to the hut. The fire was replenished, the men lay down before the door, and in a few minutes were asleep.

Mr. Oakhurst was a light sleeper. Toward morning he awoke, benumbed and cold. As he stirred the dying fire, the wind, which was now blowing strongly, brought to his cheek that which caused the blood to leave it—snow.

He started to his feet with the intention of awakening the sleepers, for there was no time to lose. But turning to where Uncle Billy had been lying, he found him gone. A suspicion leaped to his brain and a curse to his lips. He ran to the spot where the mules had been tethered; they were no longer there. The tracks were already rapidly disappearing in the snow.

The momentary excitement brought Mr. Oakhurst back to the fire with his usual calm. He did not waken the sleepers. The Innocent slumbered peacefully, with a smile on his good-humoured, freckled face; the virgin Piney slept beside her frailer sisters as sweetly as though attended by celestial guardians, and Mr. Oakhurst, drawing his blanket over his shoulders, stroked his moustaches and waited for the dawn. It came slowly in a whirling mist of snowflakes, that dazzled and confused the eye. What could be seen of the landscape

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

appeared magically changed. He looked over the valley, and summed up the present and future in two words—"snowed in!"

A careful inventory of the provisions, which, fortunately for the party, had been stored within the hut, and so escaped the felonious fingers of Uncle Billy, disclosed the fact that with care and prudence they might last ten days longer. "That is," said Mr. Oakhurst, *sotto voce* to the Innocent, "if you're willing to board us. If you ain't—and perhaps you'd better not—you can wait till Uncle Billy gets back with the provisions." For some occult reason, Mr. Oakhurst could not bring himself to disclose Uncle Billy's rascality, and so offered the hypothesis that he had wandered from the camp, and had accidentally stampeded the animals. He dropped a warning to the Duchess and Mother Shipton, who of course knew the facts of their associate's defection. "They'll find out the truth about us *all* when they find out anything," he added, significantly, "and there's no good frightening them now."

Tom Simson not only put all his worldly store at the disposal of Mr. Oakhurst, but seemed to enjoy the prospect of their enforced seclusion. "We'll have a good camp for a week, and then the snow'll melt, and we'll go back together." The cheerful gaiety of the young man and Mr. Oakhurst's calm infected the others. The Innocent, with the aid of pine-boughs, extemporised a thatch for the roofless cabin, and the Duchess directed Piney in the rearrangement of the interior with a taste and tact that opened the blue eyes of that provincial maiden to their fullest extent. "I reckon now you're used to fine things at Poker Flat," said Piney. The Duchess turned away sharply to conceal something

22

THE OUTCASTS OF POKER FLAT

that reddened her cheek through its professional tint, and Mother Shipton requested Piney not to "chatter." But when Mr. Oakhurst returned from a weary search for the trail, he heard the sound of happy laughter echoed from the rocks. He stopped in some alarm, and his first thoughts naturally reverted to the whisky, which he had prudently *cached*. "And yet it don't somehow sound like whisky," said the gambler. It was not until he caught sight of the blazing fire through the still blinding storm, and the group around it, that he settled to the conviction that it was "square fun."

Whether Mr. Oakhurst had *cached* his cards with the whisky, as something debarred the free access of the community, I cannot say. It was certain that in Mother Shipton's words, he "didn't say cards once" during that evening. Happily, the time was beguiled by an accordion, produced somewhat ostentatiously by Tom Simson from his pack. Notwithstanding some difficulties attending the manipulation of this instrument, Piney Woods managed to pluck several reluctant melodies from its keys, to an accompaniment by the Innocent on a pair of bone castanets. But the crowning festivity of the evening was reached in a rude camp-meeting hymn, which the lovers, joining hands, sang with great earnestness and vociferation. I fear that a certain defiant tone and Covenantanter's swing to its chorus, rather than any devotional quality, caused it speedily to infect the others, who at last joined in the refrain:--

*"I'm proud to live in the service of the Lord,
And I'm bound to die in His army."*

The pines rocked, the storm eddied and whirled above the miserable group, and the flames of their altar leaped heavenward, as if in token of the vow.

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

At midnight the storm abated, the rolling clouds parted, and the stars glittered keenly above the sleeping camp. Mr. Oakhurst, whose professional habits had enabled him to live on the smallest possible amount of sleep, in dividing the watch with Tom Simson, somehow managed to take upon himself the greater part of that duty. He excused himself to the Innocent by saying that he had "often been a week without sleep."

"Doing what?" asked Tom.

"Poker!" replied Oakhurst, sententiously; "when a man gets a streak of luck—nigger-luck—he don't get tired. The luck gives in first. Luck," continued the gambler, reflectively, "is a mighty queer thing. All you know about it for certain is that it's bound to change. And it's finding out when it's going to change that makes you. We've had a streak of bad luck since we left Poker Flat—you come along, and slap you get into it, too. If you can hold your cards right along, you're all right. For," added the gambler, with cheerful irrelevance—

*"I'm proud to live in the service of the Lord,
And I'm bound to die in His army."*

The third day came, and the sun, looking through the white-curtained valley, saw the outcasts divide their slowly decreasing store of provisions for the morning meal. It was one of the peculiarities of that mountain climate that its rays diffused a kindly warmth over the wintry landscape, as if in regretful commiseration of the past. But it revealed drift on drift of snow piled high around the hut—a hopeless, uncharted, trackless sea of white lying below the rocky shores to which the castaways still clung. Through the marvellously clear air the smoke of the pastoral village of Poker Flat rose miles away.

THE OUTCASTS OF POKER FLAT

Mother Shipton saw it, and from a remote pinnacle of her rocky fastness hurled in that direction a final malediction. It was her last vituperative attempt, and perhaps for that reason was invested with a certain degree of sublimity. It did her good, she privately informed the Duchess. "Just you go out there and cuss, and see." She then set herself to the task of amusing "the child," as she and the Duchess were pleased to call Piney. Piney was no chicken, but it was a soothing and original theory of the pair thus to account for the fact that she didn't swear and wasn't improper.

When night crept up again through the gorges, the reedy notes of the accordion rose and fell in fitful spasms and long-drawn gasps by the flickering camp-fire. But music failed to fill entirely the aching void left by insufficient food, and a new diversion was proposed by Piney—story-telling. Neither Mr. Oakhurst nor his female companions caring to relate their personal experiences, this plan would have failed too, but for the Innocent. Some months before he had chanced upon a stray copy of Mr. Pope's ingenious translation of the "Iliad." He now proposed to narrate the principal incidents of that poem—having thoroughly mastered the argument and fairly forgotten the words—in the current vernacular of Sandy Bar. And so for the rest of that night the Homeric demi-gods again walked the earth. Trojan bully and wily Greek wrestled in the winds, and the great pines in the cañon seemed to bow to the wrath of the son of Peleus. Mr. Oakhurst listened with quiet satisfaction. Most especially was he interested in the fate of "Ash-heels," as the Innocent persisted in denominating the "swift-footed Achilles."

So with small food and much of Homer and the

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

accordion, a week passed over the heads of the outcasts. The sun again forsook them, and again from leaden skies the snowflakes were sifted over the land. Day by day closer around them drew the snowy circle, until at last they looked from their prison over drifted walls of dazzling white that towered over twenty feet above their heads. It became more and more difficult to replenish their fires, even from the fallen trees beside them, now half hidden in the drifts. And yet no one complained. The lovers turned from the dreary prospect, and looked into each other's eyes, and were happy. Mr. Oakhurst settled himself coolly to the losing game before him. The Duchess, more cheerful than she had been, assumed the care of Piney. Only Mother Shipton, once the strongest of the party—seemed to sicken and fade. At midnight on the tenth day she called Oakhurst to her side.

"I'm going," she said, in a voice of querulous weakness, "but don't say anything about it. Don't waken the kids. Take the bundle from under my head and open it."

Mr. Oakhurst did so. It contained Mother Shipton's rations for the last week, untouched.

"Give 'em to the child," she said, pointing to the sleeping Piney.

"You've starved yourself," said the gambler.

"That's what they call it," said the woman, querulously, as she lay down again, and, turning her face to the wall, passed quietly away.

The accordion and the bones were put aside that day, and Homer was forgotten. When the body of Mother Shipton had been committed to the snow, Mr. Oakhurst took the Innocent aside, and showed him a pair of snow-shoes, which he had fashioned him from the old pack-saddle.

THE OUTCASTS OF POKER FLAT

"There's one chance in a hundred to save her yet," he said, pointing to Piney; "but it's there," he added, pointing toward Poker Flat. "If you can reach there in two days, she's safe."

"And you?" asked Tom Simson.

"I'll stay here," was the curt reply.

The lovers parted with a long embrace.

"You are not going, too?" said the Duchess, as she saw Mr. Oakhurst apparently waiting to accompany him.

"As far as the cañon," he replied. He turned suddenly, and kissed the Duchess, leaving her pallid face aflame, and her trembling limbs rigid with amazement.

Night came, but not Mr. Oakhurst. It brought the storm again and the whirling snow. Then the Duchess, feeding the fire, found that some one had quietly piled beside the hut enough fuel to last a few days longer. The tears rose to her eyes, but she hid them from Piney.

The women slept but little. In the morning, looking into each other's faces, they read their fate. Neither spoke; but Piney, accepting the position of the stronger, drew near and placed her arm around the Duchess's waist. They kept this attitude for the rest of the day. That night the storm reached its greatest fury, and, rending asunder the protecting pines, invaded the very hut.

Toward morning they found themselves unable to feed the fire, which gradually died away. As the embers slowly blackened, the Duchess crept closer to Piney, and broke the silence of many hours: "Piney, can you pray?"

"No, dear," said Piney, simply.

The Duchess, without knowing exactly why, felt relieved, and, putting her head upon Piney's

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

shoulder, spoke no more. And so reclining, the younger and purer pillowing the head of her soiled sister upon her virgin breast, they fell asleep.

The wind lulled as if it feared to waken them. Feathery drifts of snow, shaken from the long pine-boughs, flew like white-winged birds, and settled about them as they slept. The moon through the rifted clouds looked down upon what had been the camp. But all human stain, all trace of earthly travail, was hidden beneath the spotless mantle mercifully flung from above.

They slept all that day and the next, nor did they waken when voices and footsteps broke the silence of the camp. And when pitying fingers brushed the snow from their wan faces, you could scarcely have told, from the equal peace that dwelt upon them, which was she that had sinned. Even the law of Poker Flat recognized this, and turned away, leaving them still locked in each other's arms.

But at the head of the gulch, on one of the largest pine-trees, they found the deuce of clubs pinned to the bark with a bowie-knife. It bore the following, written in pencil, in a firm hand :

†

BENEATH THIS TREE
LIES THE BODY
OF
JOHN OAKHURST,
WHO STRUCK A STREAK OF BAD LUCK
ON THE 23RD OF NOVEMBER, 1850,
AND
HANDED IN HIS CHECKS
ON THE 7TH DECEMBER, 1850.

†

THE OUTCASTS OF POKER FLAT

And pulseless and cold, with a derringer by his side and a bullet in his heart, though still calm as in life, beneath the snow lay he who was at once the strongest and yet the weakest of the outcasts of Poker Flat.

MIGGLES

WE were eight, including the driver. We had not spoken during the passage of the last six miles, since the jolting of the heavy vehicle over the roughening road had spoiled the Judge's last poetical quotation. The tall man beside the Judge was asleep, his arm passed through the swaying strap and his head resting upon it,—altogether a limp, helpless-looking object, as if he had hanged himself and been cut down too late. The French lady on the back seat was asleep, too, yet in a half-conscious propriety of attitude, shown even in the disposition of the handkerchief which she held to her forehead, and which partially veiled her face. The lady from Virginia City, travelling with her husband, had long since lost all individuality in a wild confusion of ribbons, veils, furs, and shawls. There was no sound but the rattling of wheels and the dash of rain upon the roof. Suddenly the stage stopped and we became dimly aware of voices. The driver was evidently in the midst of an exciting colloquy with some one in the road,—a colloquy of which such fragments as “bridge gone,” “twenty feet of water,” “can't pass,” were occasionally distinguishable above the storm. Then came a lull, and a mysterious voice from the road shouted the parting adjuration,—

“Try Miggles's.”

We caught a glimpse of our leaders as the vehicle slowly turned, of a horseman vanishing through the rain, and we were evidently on our way to Miggles's.

Who and where was Miggles? The Judge, our authority, did not remember the name, and he knew the country thoroughly. The Washoe travel-

MIGGLES

ler thought Miggles must keep an hotel. We only knew that we were stopped by high water in front and rear, and that Miggles was our rock of refuge. A ten minutes' splashing through a tangled by-road, scarcely wide enough for the stage, and we drew up before a barred and boarded gate in a wide stone wall or fence about eight feet high. Evidently Miggles's, and evidently Miggles did not keep an hotel.

The driver got down and tried the gate. It was securely locked.

"Miggles! O Miggles!"

No answer.

"Mig-ells! You Miggles!" continued the driver, with rising wrath.

"Migglesy!" joined in the expressman, persuasively. "O Miggy! Mig!"

But no reply came from the apparently insensate Miggles. The Judge, who had finally got the window down, put his head out and propounded a series of questions, which, if answered categorically, would have undoubtedly elucidated the whole mystery, but which the driver evaded by replying that "if we didn't want to sit in the coach all night, we had better rise up and sing out for Miggles."

So we rose up and called on Miggles in chorus; then separately. And when we had finished, a Hibernian fellow-passenger from the roof called for "Maygells!" whereat we all laughed. While we were laughing, the driver cried "Shoo!"

We listened. To our infinite amazement the chorus of "Miggles" was repeated from the other side of the wall, even to the final and supplemental "Maygells."

"Extraordinary echo," said the Judge.

"Extraordinary d—d skunk!" roared the driver,

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

contemptuously. "Come out of that, Miggles, and show yourself! Be a man, Miggles! Don't hide in the dark: I wouldn't if I were you, Miggles," continued Yuba Bill, now dancing about in an excess of fury.

"Miggles!" continued the voice, "O Miggles!"

"My good man! Mr. Myghail!" said the Judge, softening the asperities of the name as much as possible: "Consider the inhospitality of refusing shelter from the inclemency of the weather to helpless females. Really, my dear sir——" But a succession of "Miggles," ending in a burst of laughter, drowned his voice.

Yuba Bill hesitated no longer. Taking a heavy stone from the road, he battered down the gate, and with the expressman, entered the enclosure. We followed. Nobody was to be seen. In the gathering darkness all that we could distinguish was that we were in a garden—from the rose-bushes that scattered over us a minute spray from their dripping leaves—and before a long, rambling wooden building. "Do you know this Miggles?" asked the Judge of Yuba Bill.

"No, nor don't want to," said Bill, shortly, who felt the Pioneer Stage Company insulted in his person by the contumacious Miggles.

"But, my dear sir," expostulated the Judge, as he thought of the barred gate.

"Lookee here," said Yuba Bill, with fine irony, "hadn't you better go back and sit in the coach till yer introduced? I'm going in," and he pushed open the door of the building.

A long room lighted only by the embers of a fire that was dying on the large hearth at its further extremity; the walls curiously papered, and the flickering firelight bringing out its grotesque pattern;

MIGGLES

somebody sitting in a large arm-chair by the fire-place. All this we saw as we crowded together into the room, after the driver and expressman.

"Hello, be you Miggles?" said Yuba Bill to the solitary occupant.

The figure neither spoke nor stirred. Yuba Bill walked wrathfully towards it, and turned the eye of his coach-lantern upon its face. It was a man's face, prematurely old and wrinkled, with very large eyes, in which there was that expression of perfectly gratuitous solemnity which I had sometimes seen in an owl's. The large eyes wandered from Bill's face to the lantern, and finally fixed their gaze on that luminous object, without further recognition.

Bill restrained himself with an effort.

"Miggles! Be you deaf? You ain't dumb, anyhow, you know"; and Yuba Bill shook the insensate figure by the shoulder.

To our great dismay, as Bill removed his hand, the venerable stranger apparently collapsed, sinking into half his size and an undistinguishable heap of clothing.

"Well, dern my skin," said Bill, looking appealingly at us, and hopelessly retiring from the contest.

The Judge now stepped forward, and we lifted the mysterious invertebrate back into his original position. Bill was dismissed with the lantern to reconnoitre outside, for it was evident that from the helplessness of this solitary man there must be attendants near at hand, and we all drew around the fire. The Judge, who had regained his authority, and had never lost his conversational amiability,—standing before us with his back to the hearth,—charged us, as an imaginary jury, as follows:—

"It is evident that either our distinguished friend

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

here has reached that condition described by Shakespeare as 'the sere and yellow leaf,' or has suffered some premature abatement of his mental and physical faculties. Whether he is really the Miggles——"

Here he was interrupted by "Miggles! O Miggles! Migglesy! Mig!" and, in fact, the whole chorus of Miggles in very much the same key as it had once before been delivered unto us.

We gazed at each other for a moment in some alarm. The Judge, in particular, vacated his position quickly, as the voice seemed to come directly over his shoulder. The cause, however, was soon discovered in a large magpie who was perched upon a shelf over the fireplace, and who immediately relapsed into a sepulchral silence, which contrasted singularly with his previous volubility. It was, undoubtedly, his voice which we had heard in the road, and our friend in the chair was not responsible for the discourtesy. Yuba Bill, who re-entered the room after an unsuccessful search, was loth to accept the explanation, and still eyed the helpless sitter with suspicion. He had found a shed in which he had put up his horses, but he came back dripping and sceptical. 'Thar ain't nobody but him within ten mile of the shanty, and that 'ard—d old skeesicks knows it."

But the faith of the majority proved to be securely based. Bill had scarcely ceased growling before we heard a quick step upon the porch, the trailing of a wet skirt, the door was flung open, and with a flash of white teeth, a sparkle of dark eyes, and an utter absence of ceremony or diffidence, a young woman entered, shut the door, and, panting, leaned back against it.

"O, if you please, I'm Miggles!"

MIGGLES

And this was Miggles! this bright-eyed, full-throated young woman, whose wet gown of coarse blue stuff could not hide the beauty of the feminine curves to which it clung; from the chestnut crown of whose head, topped by a man's oil-skin sou'-wester, to the little feet and ankles, hidden somewhere in the recesses of her boy's brogans, all was grace;—this was Miggles, laughing at us, too, in the most airy, frank, off-hand manner imaginable.

“You see, boys,” said she, quite out of breath, and holding one little hand against her side, quite unheeding the speechless discomfiture of our party, or the complete demoralization of Yuba Bill, whose features had relaxed into an expression of gratuitous and imbecile cheerfulness,—“you see, boys, I was mor'n two miles away when you passed down the road. I thought you might pull up here, and so I ran the whole way, knowing nobody was home but Jim,—and—and—I'm out of breath—and—that lets me out.”

And here Miggles caught her dripping oil-skin hat from her head, with a mischievous swirl that scattered a shower of rain-drops over us; attempted to put back her hair; dropped two hair-pins in the attempt; laughed and sat down beside Yuba Bill, with her hands crossed lightly on her lap.

The Judge recovered himself first, and essayed an extravagant compliment.

“I'll trouble you for that thar har-pin,” said Miggles, gravely. Half-a-dozen hands were eagerly stretched forward; the missing hair-pin was restored to its fair owner; and Miggles, crossing the room, looked keenly in the face of the invalid. The solemn eyes looked back at hers with an expression we had never seen before. Life and intel-

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

ligence seemed to struggle back into the rugged face. Miggles laughed again,—it was a singularly eloquent laugh,—and turned her black eyes and white teeth once more toward us.

“This afflicted person is——” hesitated the Judge.

“Jim,” said Miggles.

“Your father?”

“No.”

“Brother?”

“No.”

“Husband?”

Miggles darted a quick, half-defiant glance at the two lady passengers who I had noticed did not participate in the general masculine admiration of Miggles, and said, gravely, “No; it’s Jim.”

There was an awkward pause. The lady passengers moved closer to each other; the Washoe husband looked abstractedly at the fire; and the tall man apparently turned his eyes inward for self-support at this emergency. But Miggles’s laugh, which was very infectious, broke the silence. “Come,” she said, briskly, “you must be hungry. Who’ll bear a hand to help me get tea?”

She had no lack of volunteers. In a few moments Yuba Bill was engaged like Caliban in bearing logs for this Miranda; the expressman was grinding coffee on the verandah; to myself the arduous duty of slicing bacon was assigned; and the Judge lent each man his good-humoured and voluble counsel. And when Miggles, assisted by the Judge and our Hibernian “deck passenger,” set the table with all the available crockery, we had become quite joyous, in spite of the rain that beat against the windows, the wind that whirled down the chimney, the two ladies who whispered together in the corner, or the magpie who uttered a satirical and croaking commentary

MIGGLES

on their conversation from his perch above. In the now bright, blazing fire we could see that the walls were papered with illustrated journals, arranged with feminine taste and discrimination. The furniture was extemporized, and adapted from candle-boxes and packing-cases, and covered with gay calico, or the skin of some animal. The arm-chair of the helpless Jim was an ingenious variation of a flour-barrel. There was neatness, and even a taste for the picturesque, to be seen in the few details of the long, low room.

The meal was a culinary success. But more, it was a social triumph,—chiefly, I think, owing to the rare tact of Miggles in guiding the conversation, asking all the questions herself, yet bearing throughout a frankness that rejected the idea of any concealment on her own part, so that we talked of ourselves, of our prospects, of the journey, of the weather, of each other,—of everything but our host and hostess. It must be confessed that Miggles's conversation was never elegant, rarely grammatical, and that at times she employed expletives, the use of which had generally been yielded to our sex. But they were delivered with such a lighting up of teeth and eyes, and were usually followed by a laugh—a laugh peculiar to Miggles—so frank and honest, that it seemed to clear the moral atmosphere.

Once, during the meal, we heard a noise like the rubbing of a heavy body against the outer walls of the house. This was shortly followed by a scratching and sniffing at the door. "That's Joaquin," said Miggles, in reply to our questioning glances; "would you like to see him?" Before we could answer, she had opened the door, and disclosed a half-grown grizzly, who instantly raised himself on his haunches,

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

with his forepaws hanging down in the popular attitude of mendicancy, and looked admiringly at Miggles, with a very singular resemblance in his manner to Yuba Bill. "That's my watch-dog," said Miggles, in explanation. "Oh, he don't bite," she added, as the two lady passengers fluttered into a corner. "Does he, old Topsy?" (the latter remark being addressed directly to the sagacious Joaquin). "I tell you what, boys," continued Miggles, after she had fed and closed the door on *Ursa Minor*, "you were in big luck that Joaquin wasn't hanging round when you dropped in to-night."

"Where was he?" asked the Judge.

"With me," said Miggles. "Lord love you; he trots round with me nights like as if he was a man."

We were silent for a few moments, and listened to the wind. Perhaps we all had the same picture before us,—of Miggles walking through the rainy woods, with her savage guardian at her side. The Judge, I remember, said something about Una and her lion; but Miggles received it as she did other compliments, with quiet gravity. Whether she was altogether unconscious of the admiration she excited,—she could hardly have been oblivious of Yuba Bill's adoration,—I know not; but her very frankness suggested a perfect sexual equality that was cruelly humiliating to the younger members of our party.

The incident of the bear did not add anything in Miggles's favour to the opinions of those of her own sex who were present. In fact, the repast over, a chillness radiated from the two lady passengers that no pine-boughs brought in by Yuba Bill and cast as a sacrifice upon the hearth could wholly overcome. Miggles felt it; and, suddenly declaring that it was

MIGGLES

time to "turn in," offered to show the ladies to their bed in an adjoining room. "You, boys, will have to camp out here by the fire as well as you can," she added, "for thar ain't but the one room."

Our sex—by which, my dear sir, I allude, of course, to the stronger portion of humanity—has been generally relieved from the imputation of curiosity, or a fondness for gossip. Yet I am constrained to say that hardly had the door closed on Miggles, than we crowded together, whispering, snickering, smiling, and exchanging suspicions, surmises, and a thousand speculations in regard to our pretty hostess and her singular companion. I fear that we even hustled that imbecile paralytic, who sat like a voiceless Memnon in our midst, gazing with the serene indifference of the Past in his passionless eyes upon our wordy counsels. In the midst of an exciting discussion the door opened again, and Miggles re-entered.

But not, apparently, the same Miggles who a few hours before had flashed upon us. Her eyes were downcast, and as she hesitated for a moment on the threshold, with a blanket on her arm, she seemed to have left behind her the frank fearlessness which had charmed us a moment before. Coming into the room, she drew a low stool beside the paralytic's chair, sat down, drew the blanket over her shoulders, and saying, "If it's all the same to you, boys, as we're rather crowded, I'll stop here to-night," took the invalid's withered hand in her own, and turned her eyes upon the dying fire. An instinctive feeling that this was only premonitory to more confidential relations, and perhaps some shame at our previous curiosity, kept us silent. The rain still beat upon the roof, wandering gusts of wind stirred the embers into momentary brightness, until, in a

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

lull of the elements, Miggles suddenly lifted up her head, and, throwing her hair over her shoulder, turned her face upon the group, and asked:—

“Is there any of you that knows me?”

There was no reply.

“Think again! I lived at Marysville in '53. Everybody knew me there, and everybody had the right to know me. I kept the Polka Saloon until I came to live with Jim. That's six years ago. Perhaps I've changed some.”

The absence of recognition may have disconcerted her. She turned her head to the fire again, and it was some seconds before she again spoke, and then more rapidly:—

“Well, you see I thought some of you must have known me. There's no great harm done, anyway. What I was going to say was this: Jim here”—she took his hand in both of hers as she spoke—“used to know me, if you didn't, and spent a heap of money upon me. I reckon he spent all he had, And one day—it's six years ago this winter—Jim came into my back room, sat down on my sofy, like as you see him in that chair, and never moved again without help. He was struck all of a heap, and never seemed to know what ailed him. The doctors came, and said as how it was caused all along of his way of life,—for Jim was mighty free and wild like,—and that he would never get better, and couldn't last long anyway. They advised me to send him to Frisco, to the hospital, for he was no good to any one and would be a baby all his life. Perhaps it was something in Jim's eye, perhaps it was that I never had a baby, but I said 'No.' I was rich then, for I was popular with everybody,—gentlemen like yourself, sir, came to see me,—and I sold out my business and bought this yer place,

MIGGLES

because it was sort of out of the way of travel, you see, and I brought my baby here."

With a woman's intuitive tact and poetry, she had, as she spoke, slowly shifted her position so as to bring the mute figure of the ruined man between her and her audience, hiding in the shadow behind it, as if she offered it as a tacit apology for her actions. Silent and expressionless, it yet spoke for her; helpless, crushed, and smitten with the Divine thunderbolt, it still stretched an invisible arm around her.

Hidden in the darkness, but still holding his hand, she went on:—

"It was a long time before I could get the hang of things about yer, for I was used to company and excitement. I couldn't get any woman to help me, and a man I dursent trust; but what with the Indians hereabout, who'd do odd jobs for me, and having everything sent from the North Fork, Jim and I managed to worry through. The doctor would run up from Sacramento once in a while. He'd ask to see 'Miggles's baby,' as he called Jim, and when he'd go away, he'd say, 'Miggles, you're a trump,—God bless you'; and it didn't seem so lonely after that. But the last time he was here he said, as he opened the door to go, 'Do you know, Miggles, your baby will grow up to be a man yet and an honour to his mother; but not here, Miggles, not here!' And I thought he went away sad,—and—and——" and here Miggles's voice and head were somehow both lost completely in the shadow.

"The folks about here are very kind," said Miggles, after a pause, coming a little into the light again. "The men from the Fork used to hang around here, until they found they wasn't wanted, and the women are kind,—and don't call. I was

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

pretty lonely until I picked up Joaquin in the woods yonder one day, when he wasn't so high, and taught him to beg for his dinner; then thar's Polly—that's the magpie—she knows no end of tricks, and makes it quite sociable of evenings with her talk, and so I don't feel like as I was the only living being about the ranch. And Jim here," said Miggles, with her old laugh again, and coming out quite into the fire-light, "Jim—why, boys, you would admire to see how much he knows for a man like him. Sometimes I bring him flowers, and he looks at 'em just as natural as if he knew 'em; and times, when we're sitting alone, I read him those things on the wall. Why, Lord!" said Miggles, with her frank laugh, "I've read him that whole side of the house this winter. There never was such a man for reading as Jim."

"Why," asked the Judge, "do you not marry this man to whom you have devoted your youthful life?"

"Well, you see," said Miggles, "it would be playing it rather low down on Jim, to take advantage of his being so helpless. And then, too, if we were man and wife, now, we'd both know that I was *bound* to do what I do now of my own accord."

"But you are young yet, and attractive——"

"It's getting late," said Miggles, gravely, "and you'd better all turn in. Good-night, boys"; and, throwing the blanket over her head, Miggles laid herself down beside Jim's chair, her head pillowed on the low stool that held his feet, and spoke no more. The fire slowly faded from the hearth; we each sought our blankets in silence; and presently there was no sound in the long room but the pattering of the rain upon the roof, and the heavy breathing of the sleepers.

It was nearly morning when I awoke from a

MIGGLES

troubled dream. The storm had passed, the stars were shining, and through the shutterless window the full moon, lifting itself over the solemn pines without, looked into the room. It touched the lonely figure in the chair with an infinite compassion, and seemed to baptize with a shining flood the lowly head of the woman whose hair, as in the sweet old story, bathed the feet of Him she loved. It even lent a kindly poetry to the rugged outline of Yuba Bill, half reclining on his elbow between them and his passengers, with savagely patient eyes, keeping watch and ward. And then I fell asleep and only woke at broad day, with Yuba Bill standing over me, and "All aboard" ringing in my ears.

Coffee was waiting for us on the table, but Miggles was gone. We wandered about the house, and lingered long after the horses were harnessed, but she did not return. It was evident that she wished to avoid a formal leave-taking, and had so left us to depart as we had come. After we had helped the ladies into the coach, we returned to the house and solemnly shook hands with the paralytic Jim, as solemnly settling him back into position after each handshake. Then we looked for the last time around the long low room, at the stool where Miggles had sat, and slowly took our seats in the waiting coach. The whip cracked, and we were off!

But as we reached the high-road, Bill's dexterous hand laid the six horses back on their haunches, and the stage stopped with a jerk. For there, on a little eminence beside the road, stood Miggles, her hair flying, her eyes sparkling, her white handkerchief waving, and her white teeth flashing a last "good-bye." We waved our hats in return. And then Yuba Bill, as if fearful of further fascination, madly lashed his horses forward, and we sank back

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

in our seats. We exchanged not a word until we reached the North Fork, and the stage drew up at the Independence House. Then, the Judge leading, we walked into the bar-room and took our places gravely at the bar.

"Are your glasses charged, gentlemen?" said the Judge, solemnly taking off his white hat.

They were.

"Well, then, here's to *Miggles*, GOD BLESS HER!"

Perhaps He had. Who knows?

TENNESSEE'S PARTNER

I DO not think that we ever knew his real name. Our ignorance of it certainly never gave us any social inconvenience, for at Sandy Bar in 1854 most men were christened anew. Sometimes these appellatives were derived from some distinctiveness of dress, as in the case of "Dungaree Jack"; or from some peculiarity of habit, as shown in "Saleratus Bill," so called from an undue proportion of that chemical in his daily bread; or from some unlucky slip, as exhibited in "The Iron Pirate," a mild, inoffensive man, who earned that baleful title by his unfortunate mispronunciation of the term "iron pyrites." Perhaps this may have been the beginning of a rude heraldry; but I am constrained to think that it was because a man's real name in that day rested solely upon his own unsupported statement. "Call yourself Clifford, do you?" said Boston, addressing a timid new-comer with infinite scorn; "hell is full of such Cliffords!" He then introduced the unfortunate man, whose name happened to be really Clifford, as "Jay-bird Charley,"—an unhallowed inspiration of the moment that clung to him ever after.

But to return to Tennessee's Partner, whom we never knew by any other than this relative title; that he had ever existed as a separate and distinct individuality we only learned later. It seems that in 1853 he left Poker Flat to go to San Francisco, ostensibly to procure a wife. He never got any farther than Stockton. At that place he was attracted by a young person who waited upon the table at the hotel where he took his meals. One morning he said something to her which caused her to smile not unkindly, to somewhat coquettishly

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

break a plate of toast over his upturned, serious simple face, and to retreat to the kitchen. He followed her, and emerged a few moments later, covered with more toast and victory. That day week they were married by a Justice of the Peace, and returned to Poker Flat. I am aware that something more might be made of this episode, but I prefer to tell it as it was current at Sandy Bar—in the gulches and bar-rooms—where all sentiment was modified by a strong sense of humour.

Of their married felicity but little is known, perhaps for the reason that Tennessee, then living with his partner, one day took occasion to say something to the bride on his own account, at which, it is said, she smiled not unkindly and chastely retreated—this time as far as Marysville, where Tennessee followed her, and where they went to housekeeping without the aid of a Justice of the Peace. Tennessee's Partner took the loss of his wife simply and seriously, as was his fashion. But to everybody's surprise, when Tennessee one day returned from Marysville, without his partner's wife—she having smiled and retreated with somebody else—Tennessee's Partner was the first man to shake his hand and greet him with affection. The boys who had gathered in the cañon to see the shooting were naturally indignant. Their indignation might have found vent in sarcasm, but for a certain look in Tennessee's Partner's eye that indicated a lack of humorous appreciation. In fact, he was a grave man, with a steady application to practical detail which was unpleasant in a difficulty.

Meanwhile a popular feeling against Tennessee had grown up on the Bar. He was known to be a gambler; he was suspected to be a thief. In these suspicions Tennessee's Partner was equally com-

TENNESSEE'S PARTNER

promised ; his continued intimacy with Tennessee after the affair above quoted could only be accounted for on the hypothesis of a co-partnership of crime. At last Tennessee's guilt became flagrant. One day he overtook a stranger on his way to Red Dog. The stranger afterwards related that Tennessee beguiled the time with interesting anecdote and reminiscence, but illogically concluded the interview in the following words :

"And now, young man, I'll trouble you for your knife, your pistols, and your money. You see, your weppings might get you into trouble at Red Dog, and your money's a temptation to the evilly disposed. I think you said your address was San Francisco. I shall endeavour to call." It may be stated here that Tennessee had a fine flow of humour, which no business preoccupation could wholly subdue.

This exploit was his last. Red Dog and Sandy Bar made common cause against the highwayman. Tennessee was hunted in very much the same fashion as his prototype, the grizzly. As the toils closed around him he made a desperate dash through the Bar, emptying his revolver at the crowd before the Arcade Saloon, and so on up Grizzly Cañon ; but at its farther extremity he was stopped by a small man on a grey horse. The men looked at each other a moment in silence. Both were fearless, both self-possessed and independent ; and both types of a civilization that in the seventeenth century would have been called heroic, but in the nineteenth simply 'reckless.'

"What have you got there ? I call," said Tennessee, quietly.

"Two bowers and an ace," said the stranger, as quietly, showing two revolvers and a bowie-knife.

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

"That takes me," returned Tennessee; and with this gambler's epigram he threw away his useless pistol, and rode back with his captor.

* * * *

It was a warm night. The cool breeze which usually sprang up with the going down of the sun behind the *chaparral*-crested mountain was that evening withheld from Sandy Bar. The little cañon was stifling with heated resinous odours, and the decaying driftwood on the Bar sent forth faint, sickening exhalations. The feverishness of day, and its fierce passions, still filled the camp. Lights moved restlessly along the bank of the river, striking no answering reflection from its tawny current. Against the blackness of the pines the windows of the old loft above the express-office stood out startlingly bright; and through their curtainless panes the loungers below could see the forms of those who were even then deciding the fate of Tennessee, and above all this, etched on the dark firmament, rose the Sierra, remote and passionless, crowned with remoter passionless stars.

The trial of Tennessee was conducted as fairly as was consistent with a judge and jury who felt themselves to some extent obliged to justify in their verdict the previous irregularities of arrest and indictment. The law of Sandy Bar was implacable, but not vengeful. The excitement and personal feeling of the chase were over; with Tennessee safe in their hands, they were ready to listen patiently to any defence, which they were already satisfied was insufficient. There being no doubt in their own minds, they were willing to give the prisoner the benefit of any that might exist. Secure in the hypothesis that he ought to be hanged, on general

TENNESSEE'S PARTNER

principles they indulged him with more latitude of defence than his reckless hardihood seemed to ask. The Judge appeared to be more anxious than the prisoner, who, otherwise unconcerned, evidently took a grim pleasure in the responsibility he had created. "I don't take any hand in this yer game," had been his invariable but good-humoured reply to all questions. The Judge—who was also his captor—for a moment vaguely regretted that he had not shot him "on sight" that morning, but presently dismissed this human weakness as unworthy of the judicial mind. Nevertheless, when there was a tap at the door, and it was said that Tennessee's Partner was there on behalf of the prisoner, he was admitted at once without question. Perhaps the younger members of the jury, to whom the proceedings were becoming irksomely thoughtful, hailed him as a relief.

For he was not, certainly, an imposing figure. Short and stout, with a square face, sunburned into a preternatural redness, clad in a loose duck "jumper," and trousers streaked and splashed with red soil, his aspect under any circumstances would have been quaint, and was now even ridiculous. As he stooped to deposit at his feet a heavy carpet-bag he was carrying, it became obvious, from partially developed legends and inscriptions, that the material with which his trousers had been patched had been originally intended for a less ambitious covering. Yet he advanced with great gravity, and after having shaken the hand of each person in the room with laboured cordiality, he wiped his serious, perplexed face on a red bandanna handkerchief, a shade lighter than his complexion, laid his powerful hand upon the table to steady himself, and thus addressed the Judge:—

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

"I was passin' by," he began, by way of apology, "and I thought I'd just step in and see how things was gittin' on with Tennessee thar—my pardner. It's a hot night. I disremember any sich weather before on the Bar."

He paused a moment, but nobody volunteering any other meteorological recollection, he again had recourse to his pocket-handkerchief, and for some moments mopped his face diligently.

"Have you anything to say in behalf of the prisoner?" said the Judge, finally.

"Thet's it," said Tennessee's Partner, in a tone of relief. "I come yar as Tennessee's pardner—knowing him nigh on four year, off and on, wet and dry, in luck and out o' luck. His ways ain't allers my ways, but thar ain't any p'int in that young man, thar ain't any liveliness as he's been up to, as I don't know. And you sez to me, sez you—confidential-like, and between man and man—sez you, 'Do you know anything in his behalf?' and I sez to you, sez I—confidential-like, as between man and man—'What should a man know of his pardner?'"

"Is this all you have to say?" asked the Judge, impatiently, feeling, perhaps, that a dangerous sympathy of humour was beginning to humanize the Court.

"Thet's so," continued Tennessee's Partner. "It ain't for me to say anything agin him. And now, what's the case? Here's Tennessee wants money, wants it bad, and doesn't like to ask it of his old pardner. Well, what does Tennessee do? He lays for a stranger, and he fetches that stranger. And you lays for *him*, and you fetches *him*—and the honours is easy. And I put it to you, bein' a far-minded man, and to you, gentlemen, all, as far-minded men, ef this isn't so."

TENNESSEE'S PARTNER

"Prisoner," said the Judge, interrupting, "have you any questions to ask this man?"

"No! no!" continued Tennessee's Partner, hastily. "I play this yer hand alone. To come down to the bed-rock, it's just this: Tennessee, thar, has played it pretty rough and expensive-like on a stranger, and on this yer camp. And now, what's the fair thing? Some would say more; some would say less. Here's seventeen hundred dollars in coarse gold and a watch—it's about all my pile—and call it square!" And before a hand could be raised to prevent him, he had emptied the contents of the carpet-bag upon the table.

For a moment his life was in jeopardy. One or two men sprang to their feet, several hands groped for hidden weapons, and a suggestion to "throw him from the window" was only overridden by a gesture from the Judge. Tennessee laughed. And apparently oblivious of the excitement, Tennessee's Partner improved the opportunity to mop his face again with his handkerchief.

When order was restored, and the man was made to understand, by the use of forcible figures and rhetoric, that Tennessee's offence could not be condoned by money, his face took a more serious and sanguinary hue, and those who were nearest to him noticed that his rough hand trembled slightly on the table. He hesitated a moment as he slowly returned the gold to the carpet-bag, as if he had not yet entirely caught the elevated sense of justice which swayed the tribunal, and was perplexed with the belief that he had not offered enough. Then he turned to the Judge, and saying, "This yer is a lone hand, played alone, and without my pardner," he bowed to the jury, and was about to withdraw, when the Judge called him back.

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

"If you have anything to say to Tennessee, you had better say it now."

For the first time that evening the eyes of the prisoner and his strange advocate met. Tennessee smiled, showed his white teeth, and, saying, "Euchred, old man!" held out his hand.

Tennessee's Partner took it in his own, and saying, "I just dropped in as I was passin' to see how things was gittin' on," let the hand passively fall, and adding that "it was a warm night," again mopped his face with his handkerchief, and without another word withdrew.

The two men never again met each other alive. For the unparalleled insult of a bribe offered to Judge Lynch—who, whether bigoted, weak, or narrow, was at least incorruptible—firmly fixed in the mind of that mythical personage any wavering determination of Tennessee's fate; and at the break of day he was marched, closely guarded, to meet it at the top of Marley's Hill.

How he met it, how cool he was, how he refused to say anything, how perfect were the arrangements of the committee, were all duly reported, with the addition of a warning moral and example to all future evil-doers, in the *Red Dog Clarion*, by its editor, who was present, and to whose vigorous English I cheerfully refer the reader. But the beauty of that midsummer morning, the blessed amity of earth and air and sky, the awakened life of the free woods and hills, the joyous renewal and promise of Nature, and above all, the infinite serenity that thrilled through each, was not reported, as not being a part of the social lesson. And yet, when the weak and foolish deed was done, and a life, with its possibilities and responsibilities, had passed out of the misshapen thing that dangled between earth and sky,

52

TENNESSEE'S PARTNER

the birds sang, the flowers bloomed, the sun shone as cheerily as before; and possibly the *Red Dog Clarion* was right.

Tennessee's Partner was not in the group that surrounded the ominous tree. But as they turned to disperse, attention was drawn to the singular appearance of a motionless donkey-cart halted at the side of the road. As they approached they at once recognized the venerable "Jenny" and the two-wheeled cart as the property of Tennessee's Partner—used by him in carrying dirt from his claim; and a few paces distant the owner of the equipage himself, sitting under a buckeye-tree, wiping the perspiration from his glowing face. In answer to an inquiry, he said he had come for the body of the "diseased," "if it was all the same to the committee." He didn't wish to "hurry anything"; he could "wait." He was not working that day; and when the gentlemen were done with the "diseased," he would take him. "Ef thar is any present," he added, in his simple serious way, "as would care to jine in the fun'l, they kin come." Perhaps it was from a sense of humour, which I have already intimated was a feature of Sandy Bar—perhaps it was from something even better than that; but two-thirds of the loungers accepted the invitation at once.

It was noon when the body of Tennessee was delivered into the hands of his partner. As the cart drew up to the fatal tree, we noticed that it contained a rough oblong box—apparently made from a section of sluicing—and half filled with bark and the tassels of pine. The cart was further decorated with slips of willow, and made fragrant with buckeye-blossoms. When the body was deposited in the box, Tennessee's Partner drew over it a piece

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

of tarred canvas, and gravely mounting the narrow seat in front, with his feet upon the shafts, urged the little donkey forward. The equipage moved slowly on, at that decorous pace which was habitual with "Jenny" even under less solemn circumstances. The men—half curiously, half jestingly, but all good-humouredly—strolled along beside the cart: some in advance, some a little in the rear of the homely catafalque. But, whether from the narrowing of the road, or some present sense of decorum, as the cart passed on the company fell to the rear in couples, keeping step, and otherwise assuming the external show of a formal procession. Jack Folinsbee, who had at the outset played a funeral march in dumb-show upon an imaginary trombone, desisted, from a lack of sympathy and appreciation—not having, perhaps, your true humourist's capacity to be content with the enjoyment of his own fun.

The way led through Grizzly Cañon—by this time clothed in funeral drapery and shadows. The redwoods, burying their moccasined feet in the red soil, stood in Indian file along the track, trailing an uncouth benediction from their bending boughs upon the passing bier. A hare, surprised into helpless inactivity, sat upright and pulsating in the ferns by the roadside as the *cortège* went by. Squirrels hastened to gain a secure outlook from higher boughs; and the blue-jays, spreading their wings, fluttered before them like outriders, until the outskirts of Sandy Bar were reached, and the solitary cabin of Tennessee's Partner.

Viewed under more favourable circumstances, it would not have been a cheerful place. The unpicturesque site, the rude and unlovely outlines, the unsavoury details, which distinguish the nest-

TENNESSEE'S PARTNER

building of the California miner, were all here, with the dreariness of decay superadded. A few paces from the cabin there was a rough enclosure, which, in the brief days of Tennessee's Partner's matrimonial felicity, had been used as a garden, but was now overgrown with fern. As we approached it we were surprised to find that what we had taken for a recent attempt at cultivation was the broken soil about an open grave.

The cart was halted before the enclosure; and rejecting the offers of assistance with the same air of simple self-reliance he had displayed throughout, Tennessee's Partner lifted the rough coffin on his back, and deposited it, unaided, within the shallow grave. He then nailed down the board which served as a lid; and mounting the little mound of earth beside it, took off his hat, and slowly mopped his face with his handkerchief. This the crowd felt was a preliminary to speech; and they disposed themselves variously on stumps and boulders, and sat expectant.

"When a man," began Tennessee's Partner slowly, "has been running free all day, what's the natural thing for him to do? Why, to come home! And if he ain't in a condition to go home, what can his best friend do? Why, bring him home! And here's Tennessee has been running free, and we brings him home from his wandering." He paused, and picked up a fragment of quartz, rubbed it thoughtfully on his sleeve, and went on: "It ain't the first time that I've packed him on my back, as you see'd me now. It ain't the first time that I brought him to this yer cabin when he couldn't help himself; it ain't the first time that I and 'Jinny' have waited for him on yon hill, and picked him up and so fetched him home, when he

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

couldn't speak and didn't know me. And now that it's the last time, why—" he paused, and rubbed the quartz gently on his sleeve—"you see, it's sort of rough on his pardner. And now, gentlemen," he added, abruptly, picking up his long-handled shovel, "the fun'l's over; and my thanks, and Tennessee's thanks, to you for your trouble."

Resisting any proffers of assistance, he began to fill in the grave, turning his back upon the crowd, that after a few moments' hesitation gradually withdrew. As they crossed the little ridge that hid Sandy Bar from view, some, looking back, thought they could see Tennessee's Partner, his work done, sitting upon the grave, his shovel between his knees, and his face buried in his red bandanna handkerchief. But it was argued by others that you couldn't tell his face from his handkerchief at that distance; and this point remained undecided.



In the reaction that followed the feverish excitement of that day, Tennessee's Partner was not forgotten. A secret investigation had cleared him of any complicity in Tennessee's guilt, and left only a suspicion of his general sanity. Sandy Bar made a point of calling on him, and proffering various uncouth but well-meant kindnesses. But from that day his rude health and great strength seemed visibly to decline; and when the rainy season fairly set in, and the tiny grass-blades were beginning to peep from the rocky mound above Tennessee's grave, he took to his bed.

One night, when the pines beside the cabin were swaying in the storm, and trailing their slender fingers over the roof, and the roar and rush of the

TENNESSEE'S PARTNER

swollen river were heard below, Tennessee's Partner lifted his head from the pillow, saying, "It is time to go for Tennessee; I must put 'Jinny' in the cart"; and would have risen from his bed but for the restraint of his attendant. Struggling, he still pursued his singular fancy: "There, now, steady, 'Jinny'—steady, old girl. How dark it is! Look out for the ruts—and look out for him, too, old gal! Sometimes, you know, when he's blind drunk, he drops down right in the trail. Keep on straight up to the pine on the top of the hill. Thar—I told you so!—thar he is!—coming this way, too—all by himself, sober, and his face a-shining. Tennessee! Pardner!"

And so they met.

THE IDYL OF RED GULCH

SANDY was very drunk. He was lying under an azalea-bush, in pretty much the same attitude in which he had fallen some hours before. How long he had been lying there he could not tell, and didn't care; how long he should lie there was a matter equally indefinite and unconsidered. A tranquil philosophy, born of his physical condition, suffused and saturated his moral being.

The spectacle of a drunken man, and of this drunken man in particular, was not, I grieve to say, of sufficient novelty in Red Gulch to attract attention. Earlier in the day some local satirist had erected a temporary tombstone at Sandy's head, bearing the inscription, "Effects of McCorkle's whisky,—kills at forty rods," with a hand pointing to McCorkle's saloon. But this, I imagine, was like most local satire, personal; and was a reflection upon the unfairness of the process rather than a commentary upon the impropriety of the result. With this facetious exception, Sandy had been undisturbed. A wandering mule, released from his pack, had cropped the scant herbage beside him, and sniffed curiously at the prostrate man; a vagabond dog, with that deep sympathy which the species have for drunken men, had licked his dusty boots, and curled himself up at his feet, and lay there, blinking one eye in the sunlight, with a simulation of dissipation that was ingenious and dog-like in its implied flattery of the unconscious man beside him.

Meanwhile the shadows of the pine-trees had slowly swung around until they crossed the road, and their trunks barred the open meadow with gigantic parallels of black and yellow. Little puffs

THE IDYL OF RED GULCH

of red dust, lifted by the plunging hoofs of passing teams, dispersed in a grimy shower upon the recumbent man. The sun sank lower and lower; and still Sandy stirred not. And then the repose of this philosopher was disturbed, as other philosophers have been, by the intrusion of an unphilosophical sex.

"Miss Mary," as she was known to the little flock that she had just dismissed from the log school-house beyond the pines, was taking her afternoon walk. Observing an unusually fine cluster of blossoms on the azalea-bush opposite, she crossed the road to pluck it,—picking her way through the red dust, not without certain fierce little shivers of disgust, and some feline circumlocution. And then she came suddenly upon Sandy!

Of course, she uttered the little *staccato* cry of her sex. But when she had paid that tribute to her physical weakness she became overbold, and halted for a moment,—at least six feet from this prostrate monster,—with her white skirts gathered in her hand, ready for flight. But neither sound nor motion came from the bush. With one little foot she then overturned the satirical head-board, and muttered "Beasts!"—an epithet which probably, at that moment, conveniently classified in her mind the entire male population of Red Gulch. For Miss Mary, being possessed of certain rigid notions of her own, had not, perhaps, properly appreciated the demonstrative gallantry for which the Californian has been so justly celebrated by his brother Californians, and had, as a new-comer, perhaps fairly earned the reputation of being "stuck-up."

As she stood there she noticed, also, that the slant sunbeams were heating Sandy's head to what she judged to be an unhealthy temperature, and

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

that his hat was lying uselessly at his side. To pick it up and to place it over his face was a work requiring some courage, particularly as his eyes were open. Yet she did it and made good her retreat. But she was somewhat concerned, on looking back, to see that the hat was removed, and that Sandy was sitting up and saying something.

The truth was, that in the calm depths of Sandy's mind he was satisfied that the rays of the sun were beneficial and healthful; that from childhood he had objected to lying down in a hat; that no people but condemned fools, past redemption, ever wore hats; and that his right to dispense with them when he pleased was inalienable. This was the statement of his inner consciousness. Unfortunately, its outward expression was vague, being limited to a repetition of the following formula:—"Su'shine all ri'! Wassër maär, eh? Wass up, su'shine?"

Miss Mary stopped, and, taking fresh courage from her vantage of distance, asked him if there was anything that he wanted.

"Wass up? Wassër maär?" continued Sandy, in a very high key.

"Get up, you horrid man!" said Miss Mary, now thoroughly incensed; "get up, and go home."

Sandy staggered to his feet. He was six feet high, and Miss Mary trembled. He started forward a few paces and then stopped.

"Wass I go home for?" he suddenly asked, with great gravity.

"Go and take a bath," replied Miss Mary, eyeing his grimy person with great disfavour.

To her infinite dismay, Sandy suddenly pulled off his coat and vest, threw them on the ground, kicked off his boots, and, plunging wildly forward,

THE IDYL OF RED GULCH

darted headlong over the hill, in the direction of the river.

“Goodness Heavens!—the man will be drowned!” said Miss Mary; and then, with feminine inconsistency, she ran back to the school-house, and locked herself in.

That night, while seated at supper with her hostess, the blacksmith’s wife, it came to Miss Mary to ask, demurely, if her husband ever got drunk. “Abner,” responded Mrs. Stidger, reflectively, “let’s see: Abner hasn’t been tight since last ’lection.” Miss Mary would have liked to ask if he preferred lying in the sun on these occasions, and if a cold bath would have hurt him; but this would have involved an explanation, which she did not then care to give. So she contented herself with opening her grey eyes widely at the red-cheeked Mrs. Stidger,—a fine specimen of South-western efflorescence,—and then dismissed the subject altogether. The next day she wrote to her dearest friend in Boston: “I think I find the intoxicated portion of this community the least objectionable. I refer, my dear, to the men, of course. I do not know anything that could make the women tolerable.”

In less than a week Miss Mary had forgotten this episode, except that her afternoon walks took thereafter, almost unconsciously, another direction. She noticed, however, that every morning a fresh cluster of azalea-blossoms appeared among the flowers on her desk. This was not strange, as her little flock were aware of her fondness for flowers, and invariably kept her desk bright with anemones, syringas, and lupines; but, on questioning them, they, one and all, professed ignorance of the azaleas. A few days later, Master Johnny Stidger, whose desk was nearest to the window, was suddenly taken with

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

spasms of apparently gratuitous laughter, that threatened the discipline of the school. All that Miss Mary could get from him was, that some one had been "looking in the winder." Irate and indignant, she sallied from her hive to do battle with the intruder. As she turned the corner of the school-house she came plump upon the quondam drunkard, —now perfectly sober, and inexpressibly sheepish and guilty-looking.

These facts Miss Mary was not slow to take a feminine advantage of, in her present humour. But it was somewhat confusing to observe, also, that the beast, despite some faint signs of past dissipation, was amiable-looking,—in fact, a kind of blonde Samson, whose corn-coloured, silken beard apparently had never yet known the touch of barber's razor or Delilah's shears. So that the cutting speech which quivered on her ready tongue died upon her lips, and she contented herself with receiving his stammering apology with supercilious eyelids and the gathered skirts of uncontamination. When she re-entered the school-room, her eyes fell upon the azaleas with a new sense of revelation. And then she laughed, and the little people all laughed, and they were all unconsciously very happy.

It was on a hot day—and not long after this—that two short-legged boys came to grief on the threshold of the school with a pail of water, which they had laboriously brought from the spring, and that Miss Mary compassionately seized the pail and started for the spring herself. At the foot of the hill a shadow crossed her path, and a blue-shirted arm dexterously, but gently, relieved her of her burden. Miss Mary was both embarrassed and angry. "If you carried more of that for yourself,"

THE IDYL OF RED GULCH

she said, spitefully, to the blue arm, without deigning to raise her lashes to its owner, "you'd do better." In the submissive silence that followed she regretted the speech, and thanked him so sweetly at the door that he stumbled; which caused the children to laugh again—a laugh in which Miss Mary joined, until the colour came faintly into her pale cheek. The next day a barrel was mysteriously placed beside the door, and as mysteriously filled with fresh spring-water every morning.

Nor was this superior young person without other quiet attentions. "Profane Bill," driver of the Slumgullion stage, widely known in the newspapers for his "gallantry" in invariably offering the box-seat to the fair sex, had excepted Miss Mary from this attention on the ground that he had a habit of "cussin' on up grades," and gave her half the coach to herself. Jack Hamlin, a gambler, having once silently ridden with her in the same coach, afterwards threw a decanter at the head of a confederate for mentioning her name in a bar-room. The overdressed mother of a pupil whose paternity was doubtful, had often lingered near this astute Vestal's temple, never daring to enter its sacred precincts, but content to worship the priestess from afar.

With such unconscious intervals the monotonous procession of blue skies, glittering sunshine, brief twilights, and starlit nights passed over Red Gulch. Miss Mary grew fond of walking in the sedate and proper woods. Perhaps she believed, with Mrs. Stidger, that the balsamic odours of the firs "did her chest good," for certainly her slight cough was less frequent and her step was firmer; perhaps she had learned the unending lesson which the patient pines are never weary of repeating to heedful or

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

listless ears, And so, one day, she planned a picnic on Buckeye Hill, and took the children with her. Away from the dusty road, the straggling shanties, the yellow ditches, the clamour of restless engines, the cheap finery of shop windows, the deeper glitter of paint and coloured glass, and the thin veneering which barbarism takes upon itself in such localities,—what infinite relief was theirs! The last heap of ragged rock and clay passed, the last unsightly chasm crossed,—how the waiting woods opened their long files to receive them! How the children—perhaps because they had not yet grown quite away from the breast of the bounteous Mother—threw themselves face downward on her brown bosom with uncouth caresses, filling the air with their laughter; and how Miss Mary herself—felinely fastidious and intrenched as she was in the purity of spotless skirts, collar, and cuffs—forgot all, and ran like a crested quail at the head of her brood, until, romping, laughing, and panting, with a loosened braid of brown hair, a hat hanging by a knotted ribbon from her throat, she came suddenly and violently, in the heart of the forest, upon—the luckless Sandy!

The explanations, apologies, and not otherwise conversation that ensued, need not be indicated here. It would seem, however, that Miss Mary had already established some acquaintance with this ex-drunkard. Enough that he was soon accepted as one of the party; that the children, with that quick intelligence which Providence gives the helpless, recognized a friend, and played with his blonde beard, and long silken moustache, and took other liberties,—as the helpless are apt to do. And when he had built a fire against a tree, and had shown them other mysteries of wood-craft, their admira-

THE IDYL OF RED GULCH

tion knew no bounds. At the close of two such foolish, idle, happy hours he found himself lying at the feet of the schoolmistress, gazing dreamily in her face, as she sat upon the sloping hillside, weaving wreaths of laurel and syringa, in very much the same attitude as he had lain when first they met. Nor was the similitude greatly forced. The weakness of an easy, sensuous nature, that had found a dreamy exaltation in liquor, it is to be feared was now finding an equal intoxication in love.

I think that Sandy was dimly conscious of this himself. I know that he longed to be doing something,—slaying a grizzly, scalping a savage, or sacrificing himself in some way for the sake of this sallow-faced, grey-eyed schoolmistress. As I should like to present him in a heroic attitude, I stay my hand with great difficulty at this moment, being only withheld from introducing such an episode by a strong conviction that it does not usually occur at such times. And I trust that my fairest reader, who remembers that, in a real crisis, it is always some uninteresting stranger or unromantic policeman, and not Adolphus, who rescues, will forgive the omission.

So they sat there, undisturbed,—the woodpeckers chattering overhead, and the voices of the children coming pleasantly from the hollow below. What they said matters little. What they thought—which might have been interesting—did not transpire. The woodpeckers only learned how Miss Mary was an orphan; how she left her uncle's house, to come to California, for the sake of health and independence; how Sandy was an orphan, too; how he came to California for excitement; how he had lived a wild life, and how he was trying to reform; and other details, which, from a woodpecker's

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

view-point, undoubtedly must have seemed stupid, and a waste of time. But even in such trifles was the afternoon spent ; and when the children were again gathered, and Sandy, with a delicacy which the schoolmistress well understood, took leave of them quietly at the outskirts of the settlement, it had seemed the shortest day of her weary life.

As the long, dry summer withered to its roots, the school term of Red Gulch—to use a local euphuism,—“dried up” also. In another day Miss Mary would be free ; and for a season, at least, Red Gulch would know her no more. She was seated alone in the school-house, her cheek resting on her hand, her eyes half closed, in one of those day-dreams in which Miss Mary—I fear, to the danger of school discipline—was lately in the habit of indulging. Her lap was full of mosses, ferns, and other woodland memories. She was so preoccupied with these and her own thoughts that a gentle tapping at the door passed unheard, or translated itself into the remembrance of far-off woodpeckers. When at last it asserted itself more distinctly, she started up with a flushed cheek and opened the door. On the threshold stood a woman, the self-assertion and audacity of whose dress were in singular contrast to her timid, irresolute bearing.

Miss Mary recognized at a glance the dubious mother of her anonymous pupil. Perhaps she was disappointed, perhaps she was only fastidious ; but as she coldly invited her to enter, she half unconsciously settled her white cuffs and collar, and gathered closer her own chaste skirts. It was, perhaps, for this reason that the embarrassed stranger, after a moment's hesitation, left her gorgeous parasol open, and sticking in the dust beside the door, and then sat down at the farther end

THE IDYL OF RED GULCH

of a long bench. Her voice was husky as she began:—

“I heerd tell that you were goin’ down to the Bay to-morrow, and I couldn’t let you go until I came to thank you for your kindness to my Tommy.”

Tommy, Miss Mary said, was a good boy, and deserved more than the poor attention she could give him.

“Thank you, miss; thank ye!” cried the stranger, brightening even through the colour which Red Gulch knew facetiously as her “war paint,” and striving, in her embarrassment, to drag the long bench nearer the schoolmistress. “I thank you, miss, for that! and if I am his mother there ain’t a sweeter, dearer, better boy lives than him. And if I ain’t much as says it, thar ain’t a sweeter, dearer, angeler teacher lives than he’s got.”

Miss Mary, sitting primly behind her desk, with a ruler over her shoulder, opened her grey eyes widely at this, but said nothing.

“It ain’t for you to be complimented by the like of me, I know,” she went on, hurriedly. “It ain’t for me to be comin’ here, in broad day, to do it, either; but I come to ask a favour,—not for me, miss,—not for me, but for the darling boy.”

Encouraged by a look in the young schoolmistress’s eye, and putting her lilac-gloved hands together, the fingers downward, between her knees she went on, in a low voice:—

“You see, miss, there’s no one the boy has any claim on but me, and I ain’t the proper person to bring him up. I thought some, last year, of sending him away to ’Frisco to school, but when they talked of bringing a school-ma’am here, I waited till I saw you, and then I knew it was all right, and I could

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

keep my boy a little longer. And O, miss, he loves you so much ; and if you could hear him talk about you, in his pretty way, and if he could ask you what I ask you now, you couldn't refuse him.

"It is natural," she went on, rapidly, in a voice that trembled strangely between pride and humility,—“it's natural that he should take to you, miss, for his father, when I first knew him, was a gentleman,—and the boy must forget me, sooner or later,—and so I ain't a-goin' to cry about that. For I come to ask you to take my Tommy,—God bless him for the bestest, sweetest boy that lives,—to—to—take him with you.”

She had risen and caught the young girl's hand in her own, and had fallen on her knees beside her.

"I've money plenty, and it's all yours and his. Put him in some good school, where you can go and see him, and help him to—to—to forget his mother. Do with him what you like. The worst you can do will be kindness to what he will learn with me. Only take him out of this wicked life, this cruel place, this home of shame and sorrow. You will ; I know you will,—won't you ? You will,—you must not, you cannot say no ! You will make him as pure, as gentle as yourself ; and when he has grown up, you will tell him his father's name—the name that hasn't passed my lips for years,—the name of Alexander Morton, whom they call here Sandy ! Miss Mary !—do not take your hand away ! Miss Mary, speak to me ! You will take my boy ? Do not put your face from me. I know it ought not to look on such as me. Miss Mary !—my God, be merciful !—she is leaving me !”

Miss Mary had risen, and, in the gathering twilight, had felt her way to the open window.

THE IDYL OF RED GULCH

She stood there, leaning against the casement, her eyes fixed on the last rosy tints that were fading from the western sky. There was still some of its light on her pure young forehead, on her white collar, on her clasped white hands, but all fading slowly away. The suppliant had dragged herself, still on her knees, beside her.

"I know it takes time to consider. I will wait here all night; but I cannot go until you speak. Do not deny me now. You will!—I see it in your sweet face,—such a face as I have seen in my dreams. I see it in your eyes, Miss Mary!—you will take my boy!"

The last red beam crept higher, suffused Miss Mary's eyes with something of its glory, flickered, and faded, and went out. The sun had set on Red Gulch. In the twilight and silence, Miss Mary's voice sounded pleasantly.

"I will take the boy. Send him to me to-night."

The happy mother raised the hem of Miss Mary's skirts to her lips. She would have buried her hot face in its virgin folds, but she dared not. She rose to her feet.

"Does—this man—know of your intention?" asked Miss Mary, suddenly.

"No, nor cares. He has never even seen the child to know it."

"Go to him at once,—to-night,—now! Tell him what you have done. Tell him I have taken his child, and tell him—he must never see—see—the child again. Wherever it may be, he must not come; wherever I may take it, he must not follow! There, go now, please,—I'm weary, and—have much yet to do!"

They walked together to the door. On the threshold the woman turned.

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

"Good night."

She would have fallen at Miss Mary's feet. But at the same moment the young girl reached out her arms, caught the sinful woman to her own pure breast for one brief moment, and then closed and locked the door.

* * * * *

It was with a sudden sense of great responsibility that Profane Bill took the reins of the Slumgullion Stage the next morning, for the schoolmistress was one of his passengers. As he entered the high road, in obedience to a pleasant voice from the "inside," he suddenly reined up his horses and respectfully waited, as "Tommy" hopped out at the command of Miss Mary.

"Not that bush, Tommy,—the next."

Tommy whipped out his new pocket-knife, and, cutting a branch from a tall azalea-bush, returned with it to Miss Mary.

"All right now?"

"All right."

And the stage-door closed on the Idyl of Red Gulch.

BROWN OF CALAVERAS

A SUBDUED tone of conversation, and the absence of cigar-smoke and boot-heels at the windows of the Wingdam stage-coach, made it evident that one of the inside passengers was a woman. A disposition on the part of loungers at the stations to congregate before the window, and some concern in regard to the appearance of coats, hats, and collars, further indicated that she was lovely. All of which Mr. Jack Hamlin, on the box-seat, noted with the smile of cynical philosophy. Not that he depreciated the sex, but that he recognized therein a deceitful element, the pursuit of which sometimes drew mankind away from the equally uncertain blandishments of poker—of which it may be remarked that Mr. Hamlin was a professional exponent.

So that, when he placed his narrow boot on the wheel and leaped down, he did not even glance at the window from which a green veil was fluttering, but lounged up and down with that listless and grave indifference of his class, which was, perhaps, the next thing to good breeding. With his closely buttoned figure and self-contained air he was a marked contrast to the other passengers, with their feverish restlessness and boisterous emotion; and even Bill Masters, a graduate of Harvard, with his slovenly dress, his overflowing vitality, his intense appreciation of lawlessness and barbarism, and his mouth filled with crackers and cheese, I fear cut but an unromantic figure beside this lonely calculator of chances, with his pale Greek face and Homeric gravity.

The driver called "All aboard!" and Mr. Hamlin returned to the coach. His foot was upon the

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

wheel, and his face raised to the level of the open window, when, at the same moment, what appeared to him to be the finest eyes in the world suddenly met his. He quietly dropped down again, addressed a few words to one of the inside passengers, effected an exchange of seats, and as quietly took his place inside. Mr. Hamlin never allowed his philosophy to interfere with decisive and prompt action.

I fear that this irruption of Jack cast some restraint upon the other passengers,—particularly those who were making themselves most agreeable to the lady. One of them leaned forward, and apparently conveyed to her information regarding Mr. Hamlin's profession in a single epithet. Whether Mr. Hamlin heard it, or whether he recognized in the informant a distinguished jurist, from whom, but a few evenings before, he had won several thousand dollars, I cannot say. His colourless face betrayed no sign ; his black eyes, quietly observant, glanced indifferently past the legal gentleman, and rested on the much more pleasing features of his neighbour. An Indian stoicism—said to be an inheritance from his maternal ancestor—stood him in good service, until the rolling wheels rattled upon the river-gravel at Scott's Ferry, and the stage drew up at the International Hotel for dinner. The legal gentleman and a member of Congress leaped out, and stood ready to assist the descending goddess, while Colonel Starbottle, of Siskiyou, took charge of her parasol and shawl. In this multiplicity of attention there was a momentary confusion and delay. Jack Hamlin quietly opened the *opposite* door of the coach, took the lady's hand,—with that decision and positiveness which a hesitating and undecided sex know how to admire,—and in an instant had dexterously and gracefully swung her

BROWN OF CALAVERAS

to the ground, and again lifted her to the platform. An audible chuckle on the box, I fear, came from that other cynic, "Yuba Bill," the driver. "Look keerfully arter that baggage, Kernel," said the expressman, with affected concern, as he looked after Colonel Starbottle, gloomily bringing up the rear of the triumphant procession to the waiting-room.

Mr. Hamlin did not stay for dinner. His horse was already saddled, and awaiting him. He dashed over the ford, up the gravelly hill, and out into the dusty perspective of the Wingdam road, like one leaving an unpleasant fancy behind him. The inmates of dusty cabins by the roadside shaded their eyes with their hands, and looked after him, recognizing the man by his horse, and speculating what "was up with Comanche Jack." Yet much of this interest centred in the horse, in a community where the time made by "French Pete's" mare, in his run from the Sheriff of Calaveras, eclipsed all concern in the ultimate fate of that worthy.

The sweating flanks of his grey at length recalled him to himself. He checked his speed, and, turning into a by-road, sometimes used as a cut-off, trotted leisurely along, the reins hanging listlessly from his fingers. As he rode on, the character of the landscape changed, and became more pastoral. Openings in groves of pine and sycamore disclosed some rude attempts at cultivation,—a flowering vine trailed over the porch of one cabin, and a woman rocked her cradled babe under the roses of another. A little farther on Mr. Hamlin came upon some bare-legged children, wading in the willowy creek, and so wrought upon them with a badinage peculiar to himself, that they were emboldened to climb up his horse's legs and over his saddle, until he was fain to develop an exaggerated ferocity of demeanour,

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

and to escape, leaving behind some kisses and coin. And then, advancing deeper into the woods, where all signs of habitation failed, he began to sing,—uplifting a tenor so singularly sweet, and shaded by a pathos so subduing and tender, that I wot the robins and linnets stopped to listen. Mr. Hamlin's voice was not cultivated; the subject of his song was some sentimental lunacy, borrowed from the negro minstrels; but there thrilled through all some occult quality of tone and expression that was unspeakably touching. Indeed, it was a wonderful sight to see this sentimental blackleg, with a pack of cards in his pocket and a revolver at his back, sending his voice before him through the dim woods with a plaint about his "Nelly's grave," in a way that overflowed the eyes of the listener. A sparrow-hawk, fresh from his sixth victim, possibly recognizing in Mr. Hamlin a kindred spirit, stared at him in surprise, and was fain to confess the superiority of man. With a superior predatory capacity, *he* couldn't sing.

But Mr. Hamlin presently found himself again on the high road, and at his former pace. Ditches and banks of gravel, denuded hillsides, stumps, and decayed trunks of trees, took the place of woodland and ravine, and indicated his approach to civilization. Then a church-steeple came in sight, and he knew that he had reached home. In a few moments he was clattering down the single narrow street, that lost itself in a chaotic ruin of races, ditches, and tailings at the foot of the hill, and dismounted before the gilded windows of the "Magnolia" saloon. Passing through the long bar-room, he pushed open a green-baize door, entered a dark passage, opened another door with a pass-key, and found himself in a dimly lighted room, whose

BROWN OF CALAVERAS

furniture, though elegant and costly for the locality, showed signs of abuse. The inlaid centre-table was overlaid with stained disks that were not contemplated in the original design. The embroidered arm-chairs were discoloured, and the green velvet lounge, on which Mr. Hamlin threw himself, was soiled at the foot with the red soil of Wingdam.

Mr. Hamlin did not sing in his cage. He lay still, looking at a highly coloured painting above him, representing a young creature of opulent charms. It occurred to him then, for the first time, that he had never seen exactly that kind of a woman, and that, if he should, he would not, probably, fall in love with her. Perhaps he was thinking of another style of beauty. But just then some one knocked at the door. Without rising, he pulled a cord that apparently shot back a bolt, for the door swung open, and a man entered.

The new-comer was broad-shouldered and robust,—a vigour not borne out in the face, which, though handsome, was singularly weak, and disfigured by dissipation. He appeared to be also under the influence of liquor, for he started on seeing Mr. Hamlin, and said, "I thought Kate was here"; stammered, and seemed confused and embarrassed.

Mr. Hamlin smiled the smile which he had before worn on the Wingdam coach, and sat up, quite refreshed and ready for business.

"You didn't come up on the stage," continued the new-comer, "did you?"

"No," replied Hamlin; "I left it at Scott's Ferry. It isn't due for half an hour yet. But how's luck, Brown?"

"D—— bad," said Brown, his face suddenly assuming an expression of weak despair; "I'm

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

cleaned out again. Jack," he continued, in a whining tone, that formed a pitiable contrast to his bulky figure, "can't you help me with a hundred till to-morrow's clean-up? You see I've got to send money home to the old woman, and—you've won twenty times that amount from me."

The conclusion was, perhaps, not entirely logical, but Jack overlooked it, and handed the sum to his visitor. "The old woman business is about played out, Brown," he added, by way of commentary; "why don't you say you want to buck agin' faro? You know you ain't married!"

"Fact, sir," said Brown, with a sudden gravity, as if the mere contact of the gold with the palm of the hand had imparted some dignity to his frame, "I've got a wife—a d—— good one, too, if I do say it—in the States. It's three year since I've seen her, and a year since I've writ to her. When things is about straight, and we get down to the lead, I'm going to send for her."

"And Kate?" queried Mr. Hamlin, with his previous smile.

Mr. Brown, of Calaveras, essayed an archness of glance, to cover his confusion, which his weak face and whiskey-muddled intellect but poorly carried out, and said:—

"D—— it, Jack, a man must have a little liberty, you know. But, come, what do you say to a little game? Give us a show to double this hundred."

Jack Hamlin looked curiously at his fatuous friend. Perhaps he knew that the man was predestined to lose the money, and preferred that it should flow back into his own coffers rather than any other. He nodded his head, and drew his chair toward the table. At the same moment there came a rap upon the door.

BROWN OF CALAVERAS

"It's Kate," said Mr. Brown.

Mr. Hamlin shot back the bolt, and the door opened. But, for the first time in his life, he staggered to his feet, utterly unnerved and abashed, and for the first time in his life the hot blood crimsoned his colourless cheeks to his forehead. For before him stood the lady he had lifted from the Wingdam coach, whom Brown—dropping his cards with a hysterical laugh—greeted as:

"My old woman, by thunder!"

They say that Mrs. Brown burst into tears, and reproaches of her husband. I saw her, in 1857, at Marysville, and disbelieve the story. And the *Wingdam Chronicle*, of the next week, under the head of "Touching Reunion," said: "One of those beautiful and touching incidents, peculiar to California life, occurred last week in our city. The wife of one of Wingdam's eminent pioneers, tired of the effete civilization of the East and its inhospitable climate, resolved to join her noble husband upon these golden shores. Without informing him of her intention, she undertook the long journey, and arrived last week. The joy of the husband may be easier imagined than described. The meeting is said to have been indescribably affecting. We trust her example may be followed."

* * * * *

Whether owing to Mrs. Brown's influence, or to some more successful speculations, Mr. Brown's financial fortune from that day steadily improved. He bought out his partners in the "Nip and Tuck" lead, with money which was said to have been won at poker, a week or two after his wife's arrival, but which rumour, adopting Mrs. Brown's theory that Brown had forsworn the gaming-table, declared to

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

have been furnished by Mr. Jack Hamlin. He built and furnished the "Wingdam House," which pretty Mrs. Brown's great popularity kept overflowing with guests. He was elected to the Assembly, and gave largess to churches. A street in Wingdam was named in his honour.

Yet it was noted that in proportion as he waxed wealthy and fortunate, he grew pale, thin, and anxious. As his wife's popularity increased, he became fretful and impatient. The most uxorious of husbands, he was absurdly jealous. If he did not interfere with his wife's social liberty, it was because it was maliciously whispered that his first and only attempt was met by an outburst from Mrs. Brown that terrified him into silence. Much of this kind of gossip came from those of her own sex whom she had supplanted in the chivalrous attentions of Wingdam, which, like most popular chivalry, was devoted to an admiration of power, whether of masculine force or feminine beauty. It should be remembered, too, in her extenuation, that, since her arrival, she had been the unconscious priestess of a mythological worship, perhaps not more ennobling to her womanhood than that which distinguished an older Greek democracy. I think that Brown was dimly conscious of this. But his only confidant was Jack Hamlin, whose *infelix* reputation naturally precluded any open intimacy with the family, and whose visits were infrequent.

It was midsummer, and a moonlit night; and Mrs. Brown, very rosy, large-eyed, and pretty, sat upon the piazza, enjoying the fresh incense of the mountain breeze, and, it is to be feared, another incense which was not so fresh, nor quite as innocent. Beside her sat Colonel Starbottle and Judge

BROWN OF CALAVERAS

Boompointer, and a later addition to her court, in the shape of a foreign tourist. She was in good spirits.

"What do you see down the road?" inquired the gallant Colonel, who had been conscious, for the last few minutes, that Mrs. Brown's attention was diverted.

"Dust," said Mrs. Brown, with a sigh. "Only Sister Anne's 'flock of sheep.'"

The Colonel, whose literary recollections did not extend farther back than last week's paper, took a more practical view. "It ain't sheep," he continued; "it's a horseman. Judge, ain't that Jack Hamlin's grey?"

But the Judge didn't know; and, as Mrs. Brown suggested the air was growing too cold for further investigations, they retired to the parlour.

Mr. Brown was in the stable, where he generally retired after dinner. Perhaps it was to show his contempt for his wife's companions; perhaps, like other weak natures, he found pleasure in the exercise of absolute power over inferior animals. He had a certain gratification in the training of a chestnut mare, whom he could beat or caress as pleased him, which he couldn't do with Mrs. Brown. It was here that he recognized a certain grey horse which had just come in, and, looking a little farther on, found his rider. Brown's greeting was cordial and hearty; Mr. Hamlin's somewhat restrained. But at Brown's urgent request, he followed him up the back stairs to a narrow corridor, and thence to a small room looking out upon the stable-yard. It was plainly furnished with a bed, a table, a few chairs, and a rack for guns and whips.

"This yer's my home, Jack," said Brown, with a sigh, as he threw himself upon the bed, and

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

motioned his companion to a chair. "Her room's t'other end of the hall. It's more'n six months since we've lived together, or met, except at meals. It's mighty rough papers on the head of the house, ain't it?" he said, with a forced laugh. "But I'm glad to see you, Jack, d—— glad," and he reached from the bed, and again shook the unresponsive hand of Jack Hamlin.

"I brought ye up here, for I didn't want to talk in the stable; though, for the matter of that, it's all round town. Don't strike a light. We can talk here in the moonshine. Put up your feet on that win-der, and sit here beside me. Thar's whiskey in that jug."

Mr. Hamlin did not avail himself of the information. Brown of Calaveras turned his face to the wall, and continued:—

"If I didn't love the woman, Jack, I wouldn't mind. But it's loving her, and seeing her, day arter day, goin' on at this rate, and no one to put down the brake; that's what gits me! But I'm glad to see ye, Jack, d—— glad."

In the darkness he groped about until he had found and wrung his companion's hand again. He would have detained it, but Jack slipped it into the buttoned breast of his coat, and asked, listlessly, "How long has this been going on?"

"Ever since she came here; ever since the day she walked into the Magnolia. I was a fool then; Jack, I'm a fool now; but I didn't know how much I loved her till then. And she hasn't been the same woman since.

"But that ain't all, Jack; and it's what I wanted to see you about, and I'm glad you've come. It ain't that she doesn't love me any more; it ain't that she fools with every chap that comes along,

80

BROWN OF CALAVERAS

for, perhaps, I staked her love and lost it, as I did everything else at the Magnolia; and, perhaps, foolin' is nateral to some women, and thar ain't no great harm done, 'cept to the fools. But, Jack, I think,—I think she loves somebody else. Don't move, Jack; don't move; if your pistol hurts ye, take it off.

"It's been more'n six months now that she's seemed unhappy and lonesome, and kinder nervous and scared like. And sometimes I've ketched her lookin' at me sort of timid and pitying. And she writes to somebody. And for the last week, she's been gathering her own things,—trinkets, and furbelows, and jew'lry,—and, Jack, I think she's goin' off. I could stand all but that. To have her steal away like a thief—" He put his face downward to the pillow, and for a few moments there was no sound but the ticking of a clock on the mantel. Mr. Hamlin lit a cigar, and moved to the open window. The moon no longer shone into the room, and the bed and its occupant were in shadow. "What shall I do, Jack?" said the voice from the darkness.

The answer came promptly and clearly from the window side,—“Spot the man, and kill him on sight.”

“But, Jack?”

“He's took the risk.”

“But will that bring *her* back?”

Jack did not reply, but moved from the window towards the door.

“Don't go yet, Jack; light the candle, and sit by the table. It's a comfort to see ye, if nothin' else.”

Jack hesitated, and then complied. He drew a pack of cards from his pocket and shuffled them,

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

glancing at the bed. But Brown's face was turned to the wall. When Mr. Hamlin had shuffled the cards, he cut them, and dealt one card on the opposite side of the table and towards the bed, and another on his side of the table for himself. The first was a deuce; his own card, a king. He then shuffled and cut again. This time "dummy" had a queen, and himself a four-spot. Jack brightened up for the third deal. It brought his adversary a deuce, and himself a king again. "Two out of three," said Jack, audibly.

"What's that, Jack?" said Brown.

"Nothing."

Then Jack tried his hand with dice; but he always threw sixes, and his imaginary opponent aces. The force of habit is sometimes confusing.

Meanwhile, some magnetic influence in Mr. Hamlin's presence, or the anodyne of liquor, or both, brought surcease of sorrow, and Brown slept. Mr. Hamlin moved his chair to the window, and looked out on the town of Wingdam, now sleeping peacefully,—its harsh outlines softened and subdued, its glaring colours mellowed and sobered in the moonlight that flowed over all. In the hush he could hear the gurgling of water in the ditches, and the sighing of the pines beyond the hill. Then he looked up at the firmament, and as he did so a star shot across the twinkling field. Presently another, and then another. The phenomenon suggested to Mr. Hamlin a fresh augury. If in another fifteen minutes another star should fall—. He sat there, watch in hand, for twice that time, but the phenomenon was not repeated.

The clock struck two, and Brown still slept. Mr. Hamlin approached the table, and took from his pocket a letter, which he read by the flickering

BROWN OF CALAVERAS

candle-light. It contained only a single line, written in pencil, in a woman's hand,—

"Be at the corral, with the buggy, at three."

The sleeper moved uneasily, and then awoke.

"Are you there, Jack?"

"Yes."

"Don't go yet. I dreamed just now, Jack—dreamed of old times. I thought that Sue and me was being married agin, and that the parson, Jack, was—who do you think?—you!"

The gambler laughed, and seated himself on the bed,—the paper still in his hand.

"It's a good sign, ain't it?" queried Brown.

"I reckon. Say, old man, hadn't you better get up?"

The "old man," thus affectionately appealed to, rose, with the assistance of Hamlin's outstretched hand.

"Smoke?"

Brown mechanically took the proffered cigar.

"Light?"

Jack had twisted the letter into a spiral, lit it, and held it for his companion. He continued to hold it until it was consumed, and dropped the fragment—a fiery star—from the open window. He watched it as it fell, and then returned to his field.

"Old man," he said, placing his hands upon Brown's shoulders, "in ten minutes I'll be on the road, and gone like that spark; we won't see each other agin; but, before I go, take a fool's advice; sell out all you've got, take your wife with you, and quit the country. It ain't no place for you, nor her. Tell her she must go; make her go, if she won't. Don't whine because you can't be a saint, and she ain't an angel. Be a man,—and treat her like a woman. Don't be a d—— fool. Good-bye."

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

He tore himself from Brown's grasp, and leaped down the stairs like a deer. At the stable-door he collared the half-sleeping hostler, and backed him against the wall. "Saddle my horse in two minutes, or I'll—" The ellipsis was frightfully suggestive.

"The missis said you was to have the buggy," stammered the man.

"D——n the buggy!"

The horse was saddled as fast as the nervous hands of the astounded hostler could manipulate buckle and strap.

"Is anything up, Mr. Hamlin?" said the man, who, like all his class, admired the *élan* of his fiery patron, and was really concerned in his welfare.

"Stand aside!"

The man fell back. With an oath, a bound, and clatter, Jack was into the road. In another moment, to the man's half-awakened eyes, he was but a moving cloud of dust in the distance, towards which a star just loosed from its brethren was trailing a stream of fire.

But early that morning the dwellers by the Wingdam turnpike, miles away, heard a voice, pure as the skylark's, singing afield. They who were asleep turned over on their rude couches to dream of youth and love and olden days. Hard-faced men and anxious gold-seekers, already at work, ceased their labours and leaned upon their picks, to listen to a romantic vagabond ambling away against the rosy sunrise.

THE MAN OF NO ACCOUNT

HIS name was Fagg—David Fagg. He came to California in '52 with us, in the *Skyscraper*. I don't think he did it in an adventurous way; he probably had no other place to go to. When a knot of us young fellows would recite what splendid opportunities we resigned to go, and how sorry our friends were to have us leave, and show daguerreotypes and locks of hair, and talk of Mary and Susan, the man of no account used to sit by and listen, with a pained, mortified expression on his plain face, and say nothing. I think he had nothing to say. He had no associates except when we patronized him; and, in point of fact, he was a good deal of sport to us. He was always seasick whenever we had a capful of wind. He never got his sea-legs on, either. And I never shall forget how we all laughed when Rattler took him the piece of pork on a string—and— But you know that time-honoured joke. And then we had such a splendid lark with him. Miss Fanny Twinkler couldn't bear the sight of him, and we used to make Fagg think that she had taken a fancy to him and send him little delicacies and books from the cabin. You ought to have witnessed the rich scene that took place when he came up, stammering and very sick, to thank her! Didn't she flash up grandly and beautifully and scornfully? So like "Medora," Rattler said—Rattler knew Byron by heart—and wasn't old Fagg awfully cut up? But he got over it, and when Rattler fell sick at Valparaiso, old Fagg used to nurse him. You see, he was a good sort of fellow, but he lacked manliness and spirit.

He had absolutely no idea of poetry. I've seen him sit stolidly by, mending his old clothes, when

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

Rattler delivered that stirring apostrophe of Byron's to the ocean. He asked Rattler once, quite seriously, if he thought Byron was ever seasick. I don't remember Rattler's reply, but I know we all laughed very much, and I have no doubt it was something good, for Rattler was smart.

When the *Skyscraper* arrived at San Francisco we had a grand "feed." We agreed to meet every year and perpetuate the occasion. Of course we didn't invite Fagg. Fagg was a steerage-passenger, and it was necessary, you see, now we were ashore, to exercise a little discretion. But old Fagg, as we called him—he was only about twenty-five years old, by the way—was the source of immense amusement to us that day. It appeared that he had conceived the idea that he could walk to Sacramento, and actually started off afoot. We had a good time, and shook hands with one another all round, and so parted. Ah, me! only eight years ago, and yet some of those hands then clasped in amity have been clenched at each other, or have dipped furtively in one another's pockets. I know that we didn't dine together the next year, because young Barker swore he wouldn't put his feet under the same mahogany with such a very contemptible scoundrel as that Mixer; and Nibbles, who borrowed money at Valparaiso of young Stubbs, who was then a waiter in a restaurant, didn't like to meet such people.

When I bought a number of shares in the Coyote Tunnel at Mugginsville, in '54, I thought I'd take a run up there and see it. I stopped at the Empire Hotel, and after dinner I got a horse, and rode round the town and out to the claim. One of those individuals whom newspaper correspondents call "our intelligent informant," and to whom in all small

THE MAN OF NO ACCOUNT

communities the right of answering questions is tacitly yielded, was quietly pointed out to me. Habit had enabled him to work and talk at the same time, and he never pretermitted either. He gave me a history of the claim, and added: "You see, stranger" (he addressed the bank before him), "gold is sure to come out 'er that theer claim (he put in a comma with his pick), but the old propri-e-tor (he wriggled out the word and the point of his pick) warn't of much account (a long stroke of the pick for a period). He was green, and let the boys about here jump him," and the rest of his sentence was confided to his hat, which he had removed to wipe his manly brow with his red bandanna.

I asked him who was the original proprietor.

"His name war Fagg."

I went to see him. He looked a little older and plainer. He had worked hard, he said, and was getting on "so, so." I took quite a liking to him, and patronized him to some extent. Whether I did so because I was beginning to have a distrust for such fellows as Rattler and Mixer is not necessary for me to state.

You remember how the Coyote Tunnel went in, and how awfully we shareholders were done! Well, the next thing I heard was that Rattler, who was one of the heaviest shareholders, was up at Mugginsville, keeping bar for the proprietor of the Mugginsville Hotel, and that old Fagg had struck it rich, and didn't know what to do with his money. All this was told me by Mixer, who had been there, settling up matters, and likewise that Fagg was sweet upon the daughter of the proprietor of the aforesaid hotel. And so by hearsay and letter I eventually gathered that old Robins, the hotel man,

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

was trying to get up a match between Nellie Robins and Fagg. Nellie was a pretty, plump, and foolish little thing, and would do just as her father wished. I thought it would be a good thing for Fagg if he should marry and settle down; that as a married man he might be of some account. So I ran up to Mugginsville one day to look after things.

It did me an immense deal of good to make Rattler mix my drinks for me—Rattler! the gay, brilliant, and unconquerable Rattler, who had tried to snub me two years ago. I talked to him about old Fagg and Nellie, particularly as I thought the subject was distasteful. He never liked Fagg, and he was sure, he said, that Nellie didn't. Did Nellie like anybody else? He turned around to the mirror behind the bar, and brushed up his hair. I understood the conceited wretch. I thought I'd put Fagg on his guard and get him to hurry up matters. I had a long talk with him. You could see by the way the poor fellow acted that he was badly struck. He sighed, and promised to pluck up courage to hurry up matters to a crisis. Nellie was a good girl, and I think had a sort of quiet respect for old Fagg's unobtrusiveness. But her fancy was already taken captive by Rattler's superficial qualities, which were obvious and pleasing. I don't think Nellie was any worse than you or I. We are more apt to take acquaintances at their apparent value than their intrinsic worth. It's less trouble, and, except when we want to trust them, quite as convenient. The difficulty with women is that their feelings are apt to get interested sooner than ours, and then, you know, reasoning is out of the question. This is what old Fagg would have known had he been of any account. But he wasn't. So much the worse for him.

THE MAN OF NO ACCOUNT

It was a few months afterward, and I was sitting in my office, when in walked old Fagg. I was surprised to see him down, but we talked over the current topics in that mechanical manner of people who know that they have something else to say, but are obliged to get at it in that formal way. After an interval, Fagg, in his natural manner, said—

“I’m going home!”

“Going home?”

“Yes—that is, I think I’ll take a trip to the Atlantic States, I came to see you, as you know I have some little property, and I have executed a power of attorney for you to manage my affairs. I have some papers I’d like to leave with you. Will you take charge of them?”

“Yes,” I said. “But what of Nellie?”

His face fell. He tried to smile, and the combination resulted in one of the most startling and grotesque effects I ever beheld. At length he said—

“I shall not marry Nellie—that is”—he seemed to apologize internally for the positive form of expression—“I think that I had better not.”

“David Fagg,” I said, with sudden severity, “you’re of no account!”

To my astonishment his face brightened. “Yes,” said he, “that’s it—I’m of no account? But I always knew it. You see I thought Rattler loved that girl as well as I did, and I knew she liked him better than she did me, and would be happier, I dare say, with him. But then I knew that old Robins would have preferred me to him, as I was better off, and the girl would do as he said, and, you see, I thought I was kinder in the way, and so I left. But,” he continued, as I was about to interrupt him, “for

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

fear the old man might object to Rattler, I've lent him enough to set him up in business for himself in Dogtown. A pushing, active, brilliant fellow, you know, like Rattler, can get along, and will soon be in his old position again, and you needn't be hard on him, you know, if he doesn't. Good-bye."

I was too much disgusted with his treatment of that Rattler to be at all amiable, but as his business was profitable, I promised to attend to it, and he left. A few weeks passed. The return steamer arrived, and a terrible incident occupied the papers for days afterward. People in all parts of the State conned eagerly the details of an awful shipwreck, and those who had friends aboard went away by themselves, and read the long list of the lost under their breath. I read of the gifted, the gallant, the noble, and loved ones who had perished, and among them I think I was the first to read the name of David Fagg. For the "man of no account" had "gone home!"

MLISS

CHAPTER I

JUST where the Sierra Nevada begins to subside in gentler undulations, and the rivers grow less rapid and yellow, on the side of a great red mountain, stands "Smith's Pocket."

Seen from the red road at sunset, in the red light and the red dust, its white houses look like the outcroppings of quartz on the mountain-side. The red stage, topped with red-shirted passengers, is lost to view half-a-dozen times in the tortuous descent, turning up unexpectedly in out-of-the-way places, and vanishing altogether within a hundred yards of the town. It is probably owing to this sudden twist in the road that the advent of a stranger at Smith's Pocket is usually attended with a peculiar circumstance. Dismounting from the vehicle at the stage-office, the too confident traveller is apt to walk straight out of town under the impression that it lies in quite another direction. It is related that one of the tunnel-men, two miles from town, met one of these self-reliant passengers with a carpet-bag, umbrella, *Harper's Magazine*, and other evidences of "Civilization and Refinement," plodding along over the road he had just ridden, vainly endeavouring to find the settlement of Smith's Pocket.

An observant traveller might have found some compensation for his disappointment in the weird aspect of that vicinity. There were huge fissures on the hillside, and displacements of the red soil, resembling more the chaos of some primary elemental upheaval than the work of man; while, half-way down, a long flume straddled its narrow body and disproportionate legs over the chasm, like an enormous fossil of some forgotten antediluvian. At every step smaller ditches crossed the

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

road, hiding in their sallow depths unlovely streams that crept away to a clandestine union with the great yellow torrent below, and here and there were the ruins of some cabin with the chimney alone left intact and the hearthstone open to the skies.

The settlement of Smith's Pocket owed its origin to the finding of a "pocket" on its site by a veritable Smith. Five thousand dollars were taken out of it in one half-hour by Smith. Three thousand dollars were expended by Smith and others in erecting a flume and in tunnelling. And then Smith's Pocket was found to be only a pocket, and subject, like other pockets, to depletion. Although Smith pierced the bowels of the great red mountain, that five thousand dollars was the first and last return of his labour. The mountain grew reticent of its golden secrets, and the flume steadily ebbed away the remainder of Smith's fortune. Then Smith went into quartz-mining; then into quartz-milling; then into hydraulics and ditching; and then by easy degrees into saloon-keeping. Presently it was whispered that Smith was drinking a great deal; then it was known that Smith was a habitual drunkard, and then people began to think, as they are apt to, that he had never been anything else. But the settlement of Smith's Pocket, like that of most discoveries, was happily not dependent on the fortune of its pioneer, and other parties projected tunnels and found pockets. So Smith's Pocket became a settlement, with its two fancy stores, its two hotels, its one express-office, and its two first families. Occasionally, its one long straggling street was overawed by the assumption of the latest San Francisco fashions, imported per express, exclusively to the first families: making

MLISS

outraged Nature, in the ragged outline of her furrowed surface, look still more homely, and putting personal insult on that greater portion of the population to whom the Sabbath, with a change of linen, brought merely the necessity of cleanliness, without the luxury of adornment. Then there was a Methodist Church, and hard by a Monte Bank, and a little beyond, on the mountain-side, a graveyard ; and then a little school-house.

"The Master," as he was known to his little flock, sat alone one night in the school-house, with some open copy-books before him, carefully making those bold and full characters which are supposed to combine the extremes of chirographical and moral excellence, and had got as far as "Riches are deceitful" and was elaborating the noun with an insincerity of flourish that was quite in the spirit of his text, when he heard a gentle tapping. The woodpeckers had been busy about the roof during the day, and the noise did not disturb his work. But the opening of the door, and the tapping continuing from the inside, caused him to look up. He was slightly startled by the figure of a young girl, dirty and shabbily clad. Still, her great black eyes, her coarse, uncombed, lustreless black hair falling over her sunburned face, her red arms and feet streaked with the red soil, were all familiar to him. It was Melissa Smith,—Smith's motherless child.

"What can she want here?" thought the master. Everybody knew "Mliss," as she was called, throughout the length and height of Red Mountain. Everybody knew her as an incorrigible girl. Her fierce, ungovernable disposition, her mad freaks and lawless character, were in their way as proverbial as the story of her father's weaknesses, and as philosophically accepted by the townsfolk. She wrangled with

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

and fought with the school-boys with keener invective and quite as powerful arm. She followed the trails with a woodman's craft, and the master had met her before, miles away, shoeless, stockingless, and bareheaded on the mountain road. The miners' camps along the stream supplied her with subsistence during these voluntary pilgrimages, in freely offered alms. Not but that a larger protection had been previously extended to Mliss. The Rev. Joshua McSnagley, "stated" preacher, had placed her in the hotel as servant, by way of preliminary refinement, and had introduced her to his scholars at Sunday school. But she threw plates occasionally at the landlord, and quickly retorted to the cheap witticisms of the guests, and created in the Sabbath school a sensation that was so inimical to the orthodox dullness and placidity of that institution, that, with a decent regard for the starched frocks and unblemished morals of the two pink-and-white-faced children of the first families, the reverend gentleman had her ignominiously expelled. Such were the antecedents, and such the character of Mliss, as she stood before the master. It was shown in the ragged dress, the unkempt hair, and bleeding feet, and asked his pity. It flashed from her black, fearless eyes, and commanded his respect.

"I come here to-night," she said rapidly and boldly, keeping her hard glance on his, "because I knew you was alone. I wouldn't come here when them gals was here. I hate 'em and they hates me. That's why. You keep school, don't you? I want to be taught!"

If to the shabbiness of her apparel and uncomeliness of her tangled hair and dirty face she had added the humility of tears, the master would have extended to her the usual moiety of pity, and nothing

MLISS

more. But with the natural, though illogical instincts of his species, her boldness awakened in him something of that respect which all original natures pay unconsciously to one another in any grade. And he gazed at her the more fixedly as she went on still rapidly, her hand on that door-latch and her eyes on his:—

“My name’s Mliss,—Mliss Smith! You can bet your life on that. My father’s Old Smith,—Old Bummer Smith,—that’s what’s the matter with him. Mliss Smith,—and I’m coming to school!”

“Well?” said the master.

Accustomed to be thwarted and opposed, often wantonly and cruelly, for no other purpose than to excite the violent impulses of her nature, the master’s phlegm evidently took her by surprise. She stopped; she began to twist a lock of her hair between her fingers; and the rigid line of upper lip, drawn over the wicked little teeth, relaxed and quivered slightly. Then her eyes dropped, and something like a blush struggled up to her cheek, and tried to assert itself through the splashes of redder soil, and the sunburn of years. Suddenly she threw herself forward, calling on God to strike her dead, and fell quite weak and helpless, with her face on the master’s desk, crying and sobbing as if her heart would break.

The master lifted her gently and waited for the paroxysm to pass. When, with face still averted, she was repeating between her sobs the *mea culpa* of childish penitence,—that “she’d be good, she didn’t mean to,” etc., it came to him to ask her why she had left Sabbath school.

Why had she left the Sabbath school?—why? O yes. What did he (McSnagley) want to tell her she was wicked for? What did he tell her that God hated her for? If God hated her, what did she

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

want to go to Sabbath school for? *She* didn't want to be "beholden" to anybody who hated her.

Had she told McSnagley this?

Yes, she had.

The master laughed. It was a hearty laugh, and echoed so oddly in the little school-house, and seemed so inconsistent and discordant with the sighing of the pines without, that he shortly corrected himself with a sigh. The sigh was quite as sincere in its way, however, and after a moment of serious silence he asked about her father.

Her father? What father? Whose father? What had he ever done for her? Why did the girls hate her? Come now! what made the folks say, "Old Bummer Smith's Mliss!" when she passed? Yes; O yes. She wished he was dead—she was dead,—everybody was dead; and her sobs broke forth anew.

The master then, leaning over her, told her as well as he could what you or I might have said after hearing such unnatural theories from childish lips; only bearing in mind perhaps better than you or I the unnatural facts of her ragged dress, her bleeding feet, and the omnipresent shadow of her drunken father. Then, raising her to her feet, he wrapped his shawl around her, and, bidding her come early in the morning, he walked with her down the road. There he bade her "good night." The moon shone brightly on the narrow path before them. He stood and watched the bent little figure as it staggered down the road, and waited until it had passed the little graveyard and reached the curve of the hill, where it turned and stood for a moment, a mere atom of suffering outlined against the far-off patient stars. Then he went back to his work. But the lines of the copy-book thereafter faded into long parallels

MLISS

of never-ending road, over which childish figures seemed to pass sobbing and crying into the night. Then, the little school-house seeming lonelier than before, he shut the door and went home.

The next morning Mliss came to school. Her face had been washed, and her coarse black hair bore evidence of recent struggles with the comb, in which both had evidently suffered. The old defiant look shone occasionally in her eyes, but her manner was tamer and more subdued. Then began a series of little trials and self-sacrifices, in which master and pupil bore an equal part, and which increased the confidence and sympathy between them. Although obedient under the master's eye, at times during recess, if thwarted or stung by a fancied slight, Mliss would rage in ungovernable fury, and many a palpitating young savage, finding himself matched with his own weapons of torment, would seek the master with torn jacket, and scratched face, and complaints of the dreadful Mliss. There was a serious division among the townspeople on the subject; some threatening to withdraw their children from such evil companionship, and others as warmly upholding the course of the master in his work of reclamation. Meanwhile, with a steady persistence that seemed quite astonishing to him on looking back afterward, the master drew Mliss gradually out of the shadow of her past life, as though it were but her natural progress down the narrow path on which he had set her feet the moonlit night of their first meeting. Remembering the experience of the evangelical McSnagley, he carefully avoided that Rock of Ages on which that unskilful pilot had shipwrecked her young faith. But if, in the course of her reading, she chanced to stumble upon those few words which have lifted

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

such as she above the level of the older, the wiser, and the more prudent,—if she learned something of a faith that is symbolized by suffering, and the old light softened in her eyes, it did not take the shape of a lesson. A few of the plainer people had made up a little sum by which the ragged Miss was enabled to assume the garments of respect and civilization; and often a rough shake of the hand, and words of homely commendation from a red-shirted and burly figure, sent a glow to the cheek of the young master, and set him to thinking if it was altogether deserved.

Three months had passed from the time of their first meeting, and the master was sitting late one evening over the moral and sententious copies, when there came a tap at the door, and again Miss stood before him. She was neatly clad and clean-faced, and there was nothing, perhaps, but the long black hair and bright black eyes to remind him of his former apparition. "Are you busy?" she asked. "Can you come with me?"—and on his signifying his readiness, in her old wilful way she said, "Come, then, quick!"

They passed out of the door together and into the dark road. As they entered the town the master asked her whither she was going. She replied, "To see my father."

It was the first time he had heard her call him by that filial title or indeed anything more than "Old Smith" or the "Old Man." It was the first time in three months that she had spoken of him at all, and the master knew she had kept resolutely aloof from him since her great change. Satisfied from her manner that it was fruitless to question her purpose, he passively followed. In out-of-the-way places, low groggeries, restaurants, and saloons;

98

MLISS

in gambling-hells and dance-houses, the master, preceded by Mliss, came and went. In the reeking smoke and blasphemous outcries of low dens, the child, holding the master's hand, stood and anxiously gazed, seemingly unconscious of all in the one absorbing nature of her pursuit. Some of the revellers, recognizing Mliss, called to the child to sing and dance for them, and would have forced liquor upon her but for the interference of the master. Others, recognizing him mutely, made way for them to pass. So an hour slipped by. Then the child whispered in his ear that there was a cabin on the other side of the creek crossed by the long flume, where she thought he still might be. Thither they crossed,—a toilsome half-hour's walk,—but in vain. They were returning by the ditch at the abutment of the flume, gazing at the lights of the town on the opposite bank, when, suddenly, sharply, a quick report rang out on the clear night air. The echoes caught it, and carried it round and round Red Mountain, and set the dogs to barking all along the streams. Lights seemed to dance and move quickly on the outskirts of the town for a few moments, the stream rippled quite audibly beside them, a few stones loosened themselves from the hillside and splashed into the stream, a heavy wind seemed to surge the branches of the funereal pines, and then the silence seemed to fall thicker, heavier, and deadlier. The master turned towards Mliss with an unconscious gesture of protection, but the child had gone. Oppressed by a strange fear, he ran quickly down the trail to the river's bed, and, jumping from boulder to boulder, reached the base of Red Mountain and the outskirts of the village. Midway of the crossing he looked up and held his breath in awe. For high above him, on the narrow

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

flume, he saw the fluttering little figure of his late companion crossing swiftly in the darkness.

He climbed the bank, and, guided by a few lights moving about a central point on the mountain, soon found himself breathless among a crowd of awe-stricken and sorrowful men. Out from among them the child appeared, and, taking the master's hand, led him silently before what seemed a ragged hole in the mountain. Her face was quite white, but her excited manner gone, and her look that of one to whom some long-expected event had at last happened,—an expression that to the master in his bewilderment seemed almost like relief. The walls of the cavern were partly propped by decaying timbers. The child pointed to what appeared to be some ragged, cast-off clothes left in the hole by the late occupant. The master approached nearer with his flaming dip, and bent over them. It was Smith, already cold, with a pistol in his hand and a bullet in his heart, lying beside his empty "pocket."

CHAPTER II

The opinion which McSnagley expressed in reference to a "change of heart" supposed to be experienced by Mliss was more forcibly described in the gulches and tunnels. It was thought there that Mliss had "struck a good lead." So when there was a new grave added to the little enclosure, and at the expense of the master a little board and inscription put above it, the *Red Mountain Banner* came out quite handsomely, and did the fair thing to the memory of one of "our oldest Pioneers," alluding gracefully to that "bane of noble intellects," and otherwise genteelly shelving our dear brother with the past. "He leaves an only child to mourn his loss," says the *Banner*, "who is now an exemplary

100

MLISS

scholar, thanks to the efforts of the Rev. Mr. Mc-Snagley." The Rev. McSnagley, in fact, made a strong point of Mliss's conversion, and, indirectly attributing to the unfortunate child the suicide of her father, made affecting allusions in Sunday school to the beneficial effects of the "silent tomb," and in this cheerful contemplation drove most of the children into speechless horror, and caused the pink-and-white scions of the first families to howl dismally and refuse to be comforted.

The long dry summer came. As each fierce day burned itself out in little whiffs of pearl-grey smoke on the mountain summits, and the upspringing breeze scattered its red embers over the landscape, the green wave which in early spring upheaved above Smith's grave grew sere and dry, and hard. In those days the master, strolling in the little churchyard of a Sabbath afternoon, was sometimes surprised to find a few wild flowers plucked from the damp pine-forests scattered there, and oftener rude wreaths hung upon the little pine cross. Most of these wreaths were formed of a sweet-scented grass, which the children loved to keep in their desks, intertwined with the plumes of the buckeye, the syringa, and the wood-anemone; and here and there the master noticed the dark blue cowl of the monk's-hood, or deadly aconite. There was something in the odd association of this noxious plant with these memorials which occasioned a painful sensation to the master deeper than his æsthetic sense. One day, during a long walk, in crossing a wooded ridge he came upon Mliss in the heart of the forest, perched upon a prostrate pine, on a fantastic throne formed by the hanging plumes of lifeless branches, her lap full of grasses and pine-burrs, and crooning to herself one of the negro

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

melodies of her younger life. Recognizing him at a distance, she made room for him on her elevated throne, and with a grave assumption of hospitality and patronage that would have been ridiculous had it not been so terribly earnest, she fed him with pine-nuts and crab-apples. The master took that opportunity to point out to her the noxious and deadly qualities of the monk's-hood, whose dark blossoms he saw in her lap, and extorted from her a promise not to meddle with it as long as she remained his pupil. This done,—as the master had tested her integrity before,—he rested satisfied, and the strange feeling which had overcome him on seeing them died away.

Of the homes that were offered Mliss when her conversion became known, the master preferred that of Mrs. Morpher, a womanly and kind-hearted specimen of Southwestern efflorescence, known in her maidenhood as the "Per-rairie Rose." Being one of those who contend resolutely against their own natures, Mrs. Morpher, by a long series of self-sacrifices and struggles, had at last subjugated her naturally careless disposition to principles of "order," which she considered, in common with Mr. Pope, as "Heaven's first law." But she could not entirely govern the orbits of her satellites, however regular her own movements, and even her own "Jeemes" sometimes collided with her. Again her old nature asserted itself in her children. Lycurgus dipped into the cupboard "between meals," and Aristides came home from school without shoes, leaving those important articles on the threshold, for the delight of a barefooted walk down the ditches. Octavia and Cassandra were "keerless" of their clothes. So with but one exception, however much the "Prairie Rose" might have trimmed

102

MLISS

and pruned and trained her own matured luxuriance, the little shoots came up defiantly wild and straggling. That one exception was Clytemnestra Morpher, aged fifteen. She was the realisation of her mother's immaculate conception—neat, orderly, and dull.

It was an amiable weakness of Mrs. Morpher to imagine that "Clytie" was a consolation and model for Mliss. Following this fallacy, Mrs. Morpher threw Clytie at the head of Mliss when she was "bad," and set her up before the child for adoration in her penitential moments. It was not, therefore, surprising to the master to hear that Clytie was coming to school, obviously as a favour to the master and as an example for Mliss and others. For "Clytie" was quite a young lady. Inheriting her mother's physical peculiarities, and in obedience to the climatic laws of the Red Mountain region, she was an early bloomer. The youth of Smith's Pocket, to whom this kind of flower was rare, sighed for her in April and languished in May. Enamoured swains haunted the school-house at the hour of dismissal. A few were jealous of the master.

Perhaps it was this latter circumstance that opened the master's eyes to another. He could not help noticing that Clytie was romantic; that in school she required a great deal of attention; that her pens were uniformly bad and wanted fixing; that she usually accompanied the request with a certain expectation in her eye that was somewhat disproportionate to the quality of service she verbally required; that she sometimes allowed the curves of a round, plump white arm to rest on his when he was writing her copies; that she always blushed and flung back her blonde curls when she

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

did so. I don't remember whether I have stated that the master was a young man,—it's of little consequence, however; he had been severely educated in the school in which Clytie was taking her first lesson, and, on the whole, withstood the flexible curves and factitious glance like the fine young Spartan that he was. Perhaps an insufficient quantity of food may have tended to this asceticism. He generally avoided Clytie; but one evening, when she returned to the school-house after something she had forgotten, and did not find it until the master walked home with her, I hear that he endeavoured to make himself particularly agreeable,—partly from the fact, I imagine, that his conduct was adding gall and bitterness to the already overcharged hearts of Clytemnestra's admirers.

The morning after this affecting episode Mliss did not come to school. Noon came, but not Mliss. Questioning Clytie on the subject, it appeared that they had left the school together, but the wilful Mliss had taken another road. The afternoon brought her not. In the evening he called on Mrs. Morpher, whose motherly heart was really alarmed. Mr. Morpher had spent all day in search of her, without discovering a trace that might lead to her discovery. Aristides was summoned as a probable accomplice, but that equitable infant succeeded in impressing the household with his innocence. Mrs. Morpher entertained a vivid impression that the child would yet be found drowned in a ditch, or, what was almost as terrible, muddied and soiled beyond redemption of soap and water. Sick at heart, the master returned to the school-house. As he lit his lamp and seated himself at his desk, he found a note lying before him addressed to himself, in Mliss's handwriting. It seemed to be written on

MLISS

a leaf torn from some old memorandum book, and, to prevent sacrilegious trifling, had been sealed with six broken wafers. Opening it almost tenderly, the master read as follows :—

Respected Sir,—When you read this, I am run away. Never to come back. *Never*, Never, NEVER. You can give my beads to Mary Jennings, and my Amerika's Pride [a highly coloured lithograph from a tobacco box] to Sally Flanders. But don't you give anything to Clytie Morpher. Don't you dare to. Do you know what my oppinion is of her, it is this, she is perfekly disgustin. That is all and no more at present from

Yours respectfully,
MELISSA SMITH.

The master sat pondering on this strange epistle till the moon lifted its bright face above the distant hills, and illuminated the trail that led to the school-house, beaten quite hard with the coming and going of little feet. Then, more satisfied in mind, he tore the missive into fragments and scattered them along the road.

At sunrise the next morning he was picking his way through the palm-like fern and thick underbrush of the pine-forest, starting the hare from its form, and awakening a querulous protest from a few dissipated crows, who had evidently been making a night of it, and so came to the wooded ridge where he had once found Mliss. There he found the prostrate pine and tasselled branches, but the throne was vacant. As he drew nearer, what might have been some frightened animal started through the crackling limbs. It ran up the tossed arms of the fallen monarch, and sheltered itself in some friendly

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

foliage. The master, reaching the old seat, found the nest still warm ; looking up in the intertwining branches, he met the black eyes of the errant Mliss. They gazed at each other without speaking. She was first to break the silence.

"What do you want?" she asked curtly.

The master had decided on a course of action.

"I want some crab-apples," he said humbly.

"Sha'n't have 'em! Go away. Why don't you get 'em of Clytemnerestera?" (It seemed to be a relief to Mliss to express her contempt in additional syllables to that classical young woman's already long-drawn title.) "O you wicked thing!"

"I am hungry, Lissy. I have eaten nothing since dinner yesterday. I am famished!" and the young man in a state of remarkable exhaustion leaned against the tree.

Melissa's heart was touched. In the bitter days of her gipsy life she had known the sensation he so artfully simulated. Overcome by his heart-broken tone, but not entirely divested of suspicion, she said—

"Dig under the tree near the roots, and you'll find lots; but mind you don't tell," for Mliss had *her* hoards as well as the rats and squirrels.

But the master, of course, was unable to find them; the effects of hunger probably blinding his senses. Mliss grew uneasy. At length she peered at him through the leaves in an elfish way, and questioned—

"If I come down and give you some, you'll promise you won't touch me?"

The master promised.

"Hope you'll die if you do!"

The master accepted instant dissolution as a forfeit. Mliss slid down the tree. For a few moments

MLISS

nothing transpired but the munching of the pine-nuts. "Do you feel better?" she asked, with some solicitude. The master confessed to a recuperated feeling, and then, gravely thanking her, proceeded to retrace his steps. As he expected, he had not gone far before she called him. He turned. She was standing there quite white, with tears in her widely-opened orbs. The master felt that the right moment had come. Going up to her, he took both her hands, and, looking in her tearful eyes, said, gravely, "Lissy, do you remember the first evening you came to see me?"

Lissy remembered.

"You asked me if you might come to school, for you wanted to learn something and be better, and I said—"

"Come," responded the child promptly.

"What would *you* say if the master came now to you and said that he was lonely without his little scholar, and that he wanted her to come and teach him to be better?"

The child hung her head for a few moments in silence. The master waited patiently. Tempted by the quiet, a hare ran close to the couple, and raising her bright eyes and velvet forepaws, sat and gazed at them. A squirrel ran half-way down the furrowed bark of the fallen tree, and there stopped.

"We are waiting, Lissy," said the master, in a whisper, and the child smiled. Stirred by a passing breeze, the tree-tops rocked, and a long pencil of light stole through their interlaced boughs full on the doubting face and irresolute little figure. Suddenly she took the master's hand in her quick way. What she said was scarcely audible, but the master, putting the black hair back from her forehead, kissed her; and so, hand in hand, they passed out of the

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

damp aisles and forest odours into the open sunlit road.

CHAPTER III

Somewhat less spiteful in her intercourse with other scholars, Mliss still retained an offensive attitude in regard to Clytemnestra. Perhaps the jealous element was not entirely lulled in her passionate little breast. Perhaps it was only that the round curves and plump outline offered more extended pinching surface. But while such ebullitions were under the master's control, her enmity occasionally took a new and irrepressible form.

The master in his first estimate of the child's character could not conceive that she had ever possessed a doll. But the master, like many other professed readers of character, was safer in *à posteriori* than *à priori* reasoning. Mliss had a doll, but then it was emphatically Mliss's doll,—a smaller copy of herself. Its unhappy existence had been a secret discovered accidentally by Mrs. Morpher. It had been the old-time companion of Mliss's wanderings, and bore evident marks of suffering. Its original complexion was long since washed away by the weather, and anointed by the slime of ditches. It looked very much as Mliss had in days past. Its one gown of faded stuff was dirty and ragged as hers had been. Mliss had never been known to apply to it any childish term of endearment. She never exhibited it in the presence of other children. It was put severely to bed in a hollow tree near the school-house, and only allowed exercise during Mliss's rambles. Fulfilling a stern duty to her doll, as she would to herself, it knew no luxuries.

Now Mrs. Morpher, obeying a commendable impulse, bought another doll and gave it to Mliss. The

MLISS

child received it gravely and curiously. The master on looking at it one day fancied he saw a slight resemblance in its round red cheeks and mild blue eyes to Clytemnestra. It became evident before long that Mliss had also noticed the same resemblance. Accordingly she hammered its waxen head on the rocks when she was alone, and sometimes dragged it with a string round its neck to and from school. At other times, setting it up on her desk, she made a pin-cushion of its patient and inoffensive body. Whether this was done in revenge of what she considered a second figurative obtrusion of Clytie's excellencies upon her, or whether she had an intuitive appreciation of the rites of certain other heathens, and, indulging in that "Fetish" ceremony, imagined that the original of her wax model would pine away and finally die, is a metaphysical question I shall not now consider.

In spite of these moral vagaries, the master could not help noticing in her different tasks the working of a quick, restless, and vigorous perception. She knew neither the hesitancy nor the doubts of childhood. Her answers in class were always slightly dashed with audacity. Of course she was not infallible. But her courage and daring in passing beyond her own depth and that of the floundering little swimmers around her, in their minds outweighed all errors of judgment. Children are not better than grown people in this respect, I fancy; and whenever the little red hand flashed above her desk, there was a wondering silence, and even the master was sometimes oppressed with a doubt of his own experience and judgment.

Nevertheless, certain attributes which at first amused and entertained his fancy began to afflict him with grave doubts. He could not but see that

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

Mliss was revengeful, irreverent, and wilful. That there was but one better quality which pertained to her semi-savage disposition, — the faculty of physical fortitude and self-sacrifice, and another, though not always an attribute of the noble savage — Truth. Mliss was both fearless and sincere; perhaps in such a character the adjectives were synonymous.

The master had been doing some hard thinking on this subject, and had arrived at that conclusion quite common to all who think sincerely, that he was generally the slave of his own prejudices, when he determined to call on the Rev. McSnagley for advice. This decision was somewhat humiliating to his pride, as he and McSnagley were not friends. But he thought of Mliss and the evening of their first meeting; and perhaps with a pardonable superstition that it was not chance alone that had guided her wilful feet to the school-house, and perhaps with a complacent consciousness of the rare magnanimity of the act, he choked back his dislike and went to McSnagley.

The reverend gentleman was glad to see him. Moreover, he observed that the master was looking "peartish," and hoped he had got over the "neuralgy" and "rheumatiz." He himself had been troubled with a dumb "ager" since last conference. But he had learned to "rastle and pray."

Pausing a moment to enable the master to write his certain method of curing the dumb "ager" upon the book and volume of his brain, Mr. McSnagley proceeded to inquire after Sister Morpher. "She is an adornment to Christewanity, and has a likely growin' family," added Mr. McSnagley; "and there's that mannerly young gal—so well behaved —Miss Clytie." In fact, Clytie's perfections seemed

MLISS

to affect him to such an extent that he dwelt for several minutes upon them. The master was doubly embarrassed. In the first place, there was an enforced contrast with poor Mliss in all this praise of Clytie. Secondly, there was something unpleasantly confidential in his tone of speaking of Mrs. Morpher's earliest born. So that the master, after a few futile efforts to say something natural, found it convenient to recall another engagement, and left without asking the information required; but in his after-reflections somewhat unjustly giving the Rev. Mr. McSnagley the full benefit of having refused it.

Perhaps this rebuff placed the master and pupil once more in the close communion of old. The child seemed to notice the change in the master's manner, which had of late been constrained, and in one of their long post-prandial walks she stopped suddenly, and, mounting a stump, looked full in his face with big searching eyes. "You ain't mad?" said she, with an interrogative shake of the black braids. "No." "Nor bothered?" "No." "Nor hungry?" (Hunger was to Mliss a sickness that might attack a person at any moment.) "No." "Nor thinking of her?" "Of whom, Lissy?" "That white girl." (This last was the latest epithet invented by Mliss, who was a very dark brunette, to express Clytemnestra.) "No." "Upon your word?" (A substitute for "Hope you'll die!" proposed by the master.) "Yes." "And sacred honour?" "Yes." Then Mliss gave him a fierce little kiss, and, hopping down, fluttered off. For two or three days after that she condescended to appear more like other children, and be, as she expressed it, "good."

Two years had passed since the master's advent at Smith's Pocket, and as his salary was not large,

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

and the prospects of Smith's Pocket eventually becoming the capital of the State not entirely definite, he contemplated a change. He had informed the school trustees privately of his intentions, but educated young men of unblemished moral character being scarce at that time, he consented to continue his school term through the winter to early spring. None else knew of his intention except his one friend, a Dr. Duchesne, a young Creole physician known to the people of Wingdam as "Duchesny." He never mentioned it to Mrs. Morpher, Clytie, or any of his scholars. His reticence was partly the result of a constitutional indisposition to fuss, partly a desire to be spared the questions and surmises of vulgar curiosity, and partly that he never really believed he was going to do anything before it was done.

He did not like to think of Mliss. It was a selfish instinct, perhaps, which made him try to fancy his feeling for the child was foolish, romantic, and unpractical. He even tried to imagine that she would do better under the control of an older and sterner teacher. Then she was nearly eleven, and in a few years, by the rules of Red Mountain, would be a woman. He had done his duty. After Smith's death he addressed letters to Smith's relatives, and received one answer from a sister of Melissa's mother. Thanking the master, she stated her intention of leaving the Atlantic States for California with her husband in a few months. This was a slight superstructure for the airy castle which the master pictured for Mliss's home, but it was easy to fancy that some loving, sympathetic woman, with the claims of kindred, might better guide her wayward nature. Yet, when the master had read the letter, Mliss listened to it carelessly, received it

112

MLISS

submissively, and afterwards cut figures out of it with her scissors, supposed to represent Clytemnestra, labelled "the white girl," to prevent mistakes, and impaled them upon the outer walls of the school-house.

When the summer was about spent, and the last harvest had been gathered in the valleys, the master bethought him of gathering in a few ripened shoots of the young idea, and of having his Harvest-Home, or Examination. So the savants and professionals of Smith's Pocket were gathered to witness that time-honoured custom of placing timid children in a constrained position, and bullying them as in a witness-box. As usual in such cases, the most audacious and self-possessed were the lucky recipients of the honours. The reader will imagine that in the present instance Mliss and Clytie were pre-eminent, and divided public attention; Mliss with her clearness of material perception and self-reliance, Clytie with her placid self-esteem and saint-like correctness of deportment. The other little ones were timid and blundering. Mliss's readiness and brilliancy, of course, captivated the greatest number and provoked the greatest applause. Mliss's antecedents had unconsciously awakened the strongest sympathies of a class whose athletic forms were ranged against the walls, or whose handsome bearded faces looked in at the windows. But Mliss's popularity was overthrown by an unexpected circumstance.

McSnagley had invited himself, and had been going through the pleasing entertainment of frightening the more timid pupils by the vaguest and most ambiguous questions delivered in an impressive funereal tone; and Mliss had soared into Astronomy, and was tracking the course of our spotted ball

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

through space, and keeping time with the music of the spheres, and defining the tethered orbits of the planets, when McSnagley impressively arose. "Meelissy ! ye were speaking of the revolutions of this yere yearth and the move-*ments* of the sun, and I think ye said it had been a-doing of it since the creashun, eh ?" Mliss nodded a scornful affirmative. "Well, war that the truth ?" said McSnagley, folding his arms. "Yes," said Mliss, shutting up her little red lips tightly. The handsome outlines at the windows peered further into the school-room, and a saintly Raphael-like face, with blonde beard and soft blue eyes, belonging to the biggest scamp in the diggings, turned towards the child and whispered, "Stick to it, Mliss !" The reverend gentleman heaved a deep sigh, and cast a compassionate glance at the master, then at the children, and then rested his look on Clytie. That young woman softly elevated her round, white arm. Its seductive curves were enhanced by a gorgeous and massive specimen bracelet, the gift of one of her humblest worshippers, worn in honour of the occasion. There was a momentary silence. Clytie's round cheeks were very pink and soft. Clytie's big eyes were very bright and blue. Clytie's low-necked white book-muslin rested softly on Clytie's white, plump shoulders. Clytie looked at the master, and the master nodded. Then Clytie spoke, softly :—

"Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, and it obeyed him !" There was a low hum of applause in the school-room, a triumphant expression on McSnagley's face, a grave shadow on the master's, and a comical look of disappointment reflected from the windows. Mliss skimmed rapidly over her *Astronomy*, and then shut the book with a loud snap. A groan burst from McSnagley, an expression

114

MLISS

of astonishment from the school-room, a yell from the windows, as Mliss brought her red fist down on the desk, with the emphatic declaration—

“It’s a d—n lie. I don’t believe it!”

CHAPTER IV

The long wet season had drawn near its close. Signs of spring were visible in the swelling buds and rushing torrents. The pine-forests exhaled the fresher spicery. The azaleas were already budding, the Ceanothus getting ready its lilac livery for spring. On the green upland which climbed Red Mountain at its southern aspect the long spike of the monk’s-hood shot up from its broad-leaved stool, and once more shook its dark blue bells. Again the billow above Smith’s grave was soft and green, its crest just tossed with the foam of daisies and buttercups. The little graveyard had gathered a few new dwellers in the past year, and the mounds were placed two by two by the little paling until they reached Smith’s grave, and there there was but one. General superstition had shunned it, and the plot beside Smith was vacant.

There had been several placards posted about the town, intimating that, at a certain period, a celebrated dramatic company would perform, for a few days, a series of “side-splitting” and “screaming farces”; that, alternating pleasantly with this, there would be some melodrama and a grand divertissement, which would include singing, dancing, &c. These announcements occasioned a great fluttering among the little folk, and were the theme of much excitement and great speculation among the master’s scholars. The master had promised Mliss, to whom this sort of thing was sacred and rare, that she should

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

go, and on that momentous evening the master and Mliss "assisted."

The performance was the prevalent style of heavy mediocrity; the melodrama was not bad enough to laugh at nor good enough to excite. But the master, turning wearily to the child, was astonished, and felt something like self-accusation in noticing the peculiar effect upon her excitable nature. The red blood flushed in her cheeks at each stroke of her panting little heart. Her small passionate lips were slightly parted to give vent to her hurried breath. Her widely-opened lids threw up and arched her black eyebrows. She did not laugh at the dismal comicalities of the funny man, for Mliss seldom laughed. Nor was she discreetly affected to the delicate extremes of the corner of a white handkerchief, as was the tender-hearted "Clytie," who was talking with her "feller" and ogling the master at the same moment. But when the performance was over, and the green curtain fell on the little stage, Mliss drew a long deep breath, and turned to the master's grave face with a half-apologetic smile and wearied gesture. Then she said, "Now take me home!" and dropped the lids of her black eyes, as if to dwell once more in fancy on the mimic stage.

On their way to Mrs. Morpher's the master thought proper to ridicule the whole performance. Now he shouldn't wonder if Mliss thought that the young lady who acted so beautifully was really in earnest, and in love with the gentleman who wore such fine clothes. Well, if she were in love with him it was a very unfortunate thing! "Why?" said Mliss, with an upward sweep of the drooping lid. "Oh! well, he couldn't support his wife at his present salary, and pay so much a week for his fine clothes,

MLISS

and then they wouldn't receive as much wages if they were married as if they were merely lovers,—that is," added the master, "if they are not already married to somebody else; but I think the husband of the pretty young countess takes the tickets at the door, or pulls up the curtain, or snuffs the candles, or does something equally refined and elegant. As to the young man with nice clothes, which are really nice now, and must cost at least two and a half or three dollars, not to speak of that mantle of red drugget which I happen to know the price of, for I bought some of it for my room once,—as to this young man, Lissy, he is a pretty good fellow, and if he does drink occasionally, I don't think people ought to take advantage of it and give him black eyes and throw him in the mud. Do you? I am sure he might owe me two dollars and a half a long time, before I would throw it up in his face, as the fellow did the other night at Wingdam."

Mliss had taken his hand in both of hers, and was trying to look in his eyes, which the young man kept as resolutely averted. Mliss had a faint idea of irony, indulging herself sometimes in a species of sardonic humour, which was equally visible in her actions and her speech. But the young man continued in this strain until they had reached Mrs. Morpher's, and he had deposited Mliss in her maternal charge. Waiving the invitation of Mrs. Morpher to refreshment and rest, and shading his eyes with his hand to keep out the blue-eyed Clytemnestra's siren glances, he excused himself and went home.

For two or three days after the advent of the dramatic company, Mliss was late at school, and the master's usual Friday afternoon ramble was for once omitted, owing to the absence of his trustworthy

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

guide. As he was putting away his books and preparing to leave the school-house, a small voice piped at his side, "Please, sir?" The master turned and there stood Aristides Morpher.

"Well, my little man," said the master, impatiently, "what is it? quick!"

"Please, sir, me and 'Kerg' thinks that Mliss is going to run away agin."

"What's that, sir?" said the master, with that unjust testiness with which we always receive disagreeable news.

"Why, sir, she don't stay home any more, and 'Kerg' and me see her talking with one of those actor fellers, and she's with him now; and please, sir, yesterday she told 'Kerg' and me she could make a speech as well as Miss Cellerstina Montmoressy, and she spouted right off by heart," and the little fellow paused in a collapsed condition.

"What actor?" asked the master.

"Him as wears the shiny hat. And hair. And gold pin. And gold chain," said the just Aristides, putting periods for commas to eke out his breath.

The master put on his gloves and hat, feeling an unpleasant tightness in his chest and thorax, and walked out in the road. Aristides trotted along by his side, endeavouring to keep pace with his short legs to the master's strides, when the master stopped suddenly, and Aristides bumped up against him. "Where were they talking?" asked the master, as if continuing the conversation.

"At the Arcade," said Aristides.

When they reached the main street the master paused. "Run down home," said he to the boy, "If Mliss is there, come to the Arcade and tell me. If she isn't there, stay home; run!" And off trotted the short-legged Aristides.

MLISS

The Arcade was just across the way,—a long, rambling building containing a bar-room, billiard-room and restaurant. As the young man crossed the plaza he noticed that two or three of the passers-by turned and looked after him. He looked at his clothes, took out his handkerchief and wiped his face, before he entered the bar-room. It contained the usual number of loungers, who stared at him as he entered. One of them looked at him so fixedly and with such a strange expression that the master stopped and looked again, and then saw it was only his own reflection in a large mirror. This made the master think that perhaps he was a little excited, and so he took up a copy of the *Red Mountain Banner* from one of the tables, and tried to recover his composure by reading the column of advertisements.

He then walked through the bar-room, through the restaurant, and into the billiard-room. The child was not there. In the latter apartment a person was standing by one of the tables with a broad-brimmed glazed hat on his head. The master recognized him as the agent of the dramatic company; he had taken a dislike to him at their first meeting, from the peculiar fashion of wearing his beard and hair. Satisfied that the object of his search was not there, he turned to the man with the glazed hat. He had noticed the master, but tried that common trick of unconsciousness, in which vulgar natures always fail. Balancing a billiard-cue in his hand, he pretended to play with a ball in the centre of the table. The master stood opposite to him until he raised his eyes; when their glances met, the master walked up to him.

He had intended to avoid a scene or quarrel, but when he began to speak, something kept rising in

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

his throat and retarded his utterance, and his own voice frightened him, it sounded so distant, low, and resonant. "I understand," he began, "that Melissa Smith, an orphan, and one of my scholars, has talked with you about adopting your profession. Is that so?"

The man with the glazed hat leaned over the table, and made an imaginary shot, that sent the ball spinning round the cushions. Then walking round the table he recovered the ball and placed it upon the spot. This duty discharged, getting ready for another shot, he said,—

"S'pose she has?"

The master choked up again, but, squeezing the cushion of the table in his gloved hand, he went on:—

"If you are a gentleman, I have only to tell you that I am her guardian, and responsible for her career. You know as well as I do the kind of life you offer her. As you may learn of any one here, I have already brought her out of an existence worse than death—out of the streets and the contamination of vice. I am trying to do so again, Let us talk like men. She has neither father, mother, sister, or brother. Are you seeking to give her an equivalent for these?"

The man with the glazed hat examined the point of his cue, and then looked around for somebody to enjoy the joke with him.

"I know that she is a strange, wilful girl," continued the master, "but she is better than she was. I believe that I have some influence over her still. I beg and hope, therefore, that you will take no further steps in this matter, but as a man, as a gentleman, leave her to me. I am willing—" But here something rose again in the master's throat, and the sentence remained unfinished.

MLISS

The man with the glazed hat, mistaking the master's silence, raised his head with a coarse, brutal laugh, and said in a loud voice,—

“Want her yourself, do you? That cock won't fight here, young man!”

The insult was more in the tone than the words, more in the glance than tone, and more in the man's instinctive nature than all these. The best appreciable rhetoric to this kind of animal is a blow. The master felt this, and, with his pent-up, nervous energy finding expression in the one act, he struck the brute full in his grinning face. The blow sent the glazed hat one way and the cue another, and tore the glove and skin from the master's hand from knuckle to joint. It opened up the corners of the fellow's mouth, and spoilt the peculiar shape of his beard for some time to come.

There was a shout, an imprecation, a scuffle, and the trampling of many feet. Then the crowd parted right and left, and two quick reports followed each other in rapid succession. Then they closed again about his opponent, and the master was standing alone. He remembered picking bits of burning wadding from his coat-sleeve with his left hand. Some one was holding his other hand. Looking at it, he saw it was still bleeding from the blow, but his fingers were clenched around the handle of a glittering knife. He could not remember when or how he got it.

The man who was holding his hand was Mr. Morpher. He hurried the master to the door, but the master held back, and tried to tell him as well as he could with his parched throat about Mliss. “It's all right, my boy,” said Mr. Morpher. “She's home!” And they passed out into the street together. As they walked along Mr. Morpher said that Mliss had come running into the house a few

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

moments before, and had dragged him out, saying that somebody was trying to kill the master at the Arcade. Wishing to be alone, the master promised Mr. Morpher that he would not seek the agent again that night, and parted from him, taking the road toward the school-house. He was surprised on nearing it to find the door open,—still more surprised to find Mliss sitting there.

The master's nature, as I have hinted before, had, like most sensitive organisations, a selfish basis. The brutal taunt thrown out by his late adversary still rankled in his heart. It was possible, he thought, that such a construction might be put upon his affection for the child, which at best was foolish and Quixotic. Besides, had she not voluntarily abnegated his authority and affection? And what had everybody else said about her? Why should he alone combat the opinion of all, and be at last obliged tacitly to confess the truth of all they had predicted? And he had been a participant in a low bar-room fight with a common boor, and risked his life, to prove what? What had he proved? Nothing. What would the people say? What would his friends say? What would McSnagley say?

In his self-accusation the last person he should have wished to meet was Mliss. He entered the door, and going up to the desk, told the child, in a few cold words, that he was busy, and wished to be alone. As she rose, he took her vacant seat, and, sitting down, buried his head in his hands. When he looked up again she was still standing there. She was looking at his face with an anxious expression.

"Did you kill him?" she asked.

"No!" said the master.

"That's what I gave you the knife for!" said the child, quickly.

MLISS

"Gave me the knife?" repeated the master, in bewilderment.

"Yes, gave you the knife. I was there under the bar. Saw you hit him. Saw you both fall. He dropped his old knife. I gave it to you. Why didn't you stick him?" said Mliss, rapidly, with an expressive twinkle of the black eyes and a gesture of the little red hand.

The master could only look his astonishment.

"Yes," said Mliss. "If you'd ask me, I'd told you I was off with the play-actors. Why was I off with the play-actors? Because you wouldn't tell me you was going away. I knew it. I heard you tell the Doctor so. I wasn't a goin' to stay here alone with those Morphers. I'd rather die first."

With a dramatic gesture, which was perfectly consistent with her character, she drew from her bosom a few limp green leaves, and, holding them out at arm's length, said, in her quick vivid way, and in the queer pronunciation of her old life, which she fell into when unduly excited,—

"That's the poison plant you said would kill me. I'll go with the play-actors, or I'll eat this and die here. I don't care which. I won't stay here, where they hate and despise me! Neither would you let me, if you didn't hate and despise me too!"

The passionate little breast heaved, and two big tears peeped over the edge of Mliss's eyelids, but she whisked them away with the corner of her apron as if they had been wasps.

"If you lock me up in jail," said Mliss fiercely, "to keep me from the play-actors, I'll poison myself. Father killed himself,—why shouldn't I? You said a mouthful of that root would kill me, and I always carry it here," and she struck her breast with her clenched fist.

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

The master thought of the vacant plot beside Smith's grave, and of the passionate little figure before him. Seizing her hands in his, and looking full into her truthful eyes, he said,—

“Lissy, will you go with *me* ?”

The child put her arms around his neck, and said, joyfully, “Yes.”

“But now—to-night ?”

“To-night.”

And, hand in hand, they passed into the road,—the narrow road that had once brought her weary feet to the master's door, and which it seemed she should not tread again alone. The stars glittered brightly above them. For good or ill the lesson had been learned, and behind them the school of Red Mountain closed upon them for ever.

THE ROMANCE OF MADROÑO HOLLOW

THE latch on the garden gate of the Folinsbee Ranch clicked twice. The gate itself was so much in shadow that lovely night, that "old man Folinsbee," sitting in his porch, could distinguish nothing but a tall white hat, and beside it a few fluttering ribbons, under the pines that marked the entrance. Whether because of this fact, or that he considered a sufficient time had elapsed since the clicking of the latch for more positive disclosure, I do not know; but after a few moments' hesitation he quietly laid aside his pipe and walked slowly down the winding path towards the gate. At the Ceanothus hedge he stopped and listened.

There was not much to hear. The hat was saying to the ribbons that it was a fine night, and remarking generally upon the clear outline of the Sierras against the blue-black sky. The ribbons, it so appeared, had admired this all the way home, and asked the hat if it had ever seen anything half so lovely as the moonlight on the summit. The hat never had; it recalled some lovely nights in the South in Alabama ("in the South in Ahlabahm" was the way the old man heard it), but then there were other things that made this night seem so pleasant. The ribbons could not possibly conceive what the hat could be thinking about. At this point there was a pause, of which Mr. Folinsbee availed himself to walk very grimly and crouchingly down the gravel-walk toward the gate. Then the hat was lifted, and disappeared in the shadow, and Mr. Folinsbee confronted only the half-foolish, half-mischievous, but wholly pretty face of his daughter.

It was afterward known to Madroño Hollow that

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

sharp words passed between "Miss Jo" and the old man, and that the latter coupled the names of one Culpepper Starbottle, and his uncle, Colonel Starbottle, with certain uncomplimentary epithets, and that Miss Jo retaliated sharply. "Her father's blood before her father's face boiled up and proved her truly of his race," quoted the blacksmith, who leaned toward the noble verse of Byron. "She saw the old man's bluff and raised him," was the directer comment of the college-bred Masters.

Meanwhile the subject of these animadversions proceeded slowly along the road to a point where the Folinsbee mansion came in view,—a long, narrow, white building, unpretentious yet superior to its neighbours, and bearing some evidences of taste and refinement in the vines that clambered over its porch, in its French windows, and the white muslin curtains that kept out the fierce California sun by day, and were now touched with silver in the gracious moonlight. Culpepper leaned against the low fence, and gazed long and earnestly at the building. Then the moonlight vanished ghostlike from one of the windows, a material glow took its place, and a girlish figure, holding a candle, drew the white curtains together. To Culpepper it was a vestal virgin standing before a hallowed shrine; to the prosaic observer I fear it was only a fair-haired young woman, whose wicked black eyes still shone with unfilial warmth. Howbeit, when the figure had disappeared he stepped out briskly into the moonlight of the high road. Here he took off his distinguishing hat to wipe his forehead, and the moon shone full upon his face.

It was not an unprepossessing one, albeit a trifle too thin and lank and bilious to be altogether pleasant. The cheekbones were prominent, and the

ROMANCE OF MADROÑO HOLLOW

black eyes sunken in their orbits. Straight black hair fell slantwise off a high but narrow forehead, and swept part of a hollow cheek. A long black moustache followed the perpendicular curves of his mouth. It was on the whole a serious, even Quixotic face, but at times it was relieved by a rare smile of such tender and even pathetic sweetness, that Miss Jo is reported to have said that, if it would only last through the ceremony, she would have married its possessor on the spot. "I once told him so," added that shameless young woman; "but the man instantly fell into a settled melancholy, and hasn't smiled since."

A half-mile below the Folinsbee Ranch the white road dipped and was crossed by a trail that ran through Madroño Hollow. Perhaps because it was a near cut-off to the settlement, perhaps from some less practical reason, Culpepper took this trail, and in a few moments stood among the rarely beautiful trees that gave their name to the valley. Even in that uncertain light the weird beauty of these harlequin masqueraders was apparent; their red trunks—a blush in the moonlight, a deep blood-stain in the shadow—stood out against the silvery green foliage. It was as if Nature in some gracious moment had here caught and crystallized the gypsy memories of the transplanted Spaniard, to cheer him in his lonely exile.

As Culpepper entered the grove he heard loud voices. As he turned toward a clump of trees, a figure so *bizarre* and characteristic that it might have been a resident Daphne—a figure over-dressed in crimson silk and lace, with bare brown arms and shoulders, and a wreath of honeysuckle—stepped out of the shadow. It was followed by a man. Culpepper started. To come to the point briefly,

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

he recognized in the man the features of his respected uncle, Colonel Starbottle; in the female, a lady who may be briefly described as one possessing absolutely no claim to an introduction to the polite reader. To hurry over equally unpleasant details, both were evidently under the influence of liquor.

From the excited conversation that ensued, Culpepper gathered that some insult had been put upon the lady at a public ball which she had attended that evening; that the Colonel, her escort, had failed to resent it with that sanguinary completeness that she desired. I regret that, even in a liberal age, I may not record the exact and even picturesque language in which this was conveyed to her hearers. Enough that at the close of a fiery peroration, with feminine inconsistency she flew at the gallant Colonel, and would have visited delayed vengeance upon his luckless head, but for the prompt interference of Culpepper. Thwarted in this, she threw herself upon the ground, and then into unpicturesque hysterics. There was a fine moral lesson, not only in this grotesque performance of a sex which cannot afford to be grotesque, but in the ludicrous concern with which it inspired the two men. Culpepper, to whom woman was more or less angelic, was pained and sympathetic; the Colonel, to whom she was more or less improper, was exceedingly terrified and embarrassed. Howbeit, the storm was soon over, and after Mistress Dolores had returned a little dagger to its sheath (her garter), she quietly took herself out of Madroño Hollow, and happily out of these pages for ever. The two men, left to themselves, conversed in low tones. Dawn stole upon them before they separated: the Colonel, quite sobered, and in full possession of his usual jaunty self-assertion;

128

ROMANCE OF MADROÑO HOLLOW

Culpepper with a baleful glow in his hollow cheek, and in his dark eyes a rising fire.

The next morning the general ear of Madroño Hollow was filled with rumours of the Colonel's mishap. It was asserted that he had been invited to withdraw his female companion from the floor of the Assembly Ball at the Independence Hotel, and that, failing to do this, both were expelled. It is to be regretted that in 1854 public opinion was divided in regard to the propriety of this step, and that there was some discussion as to the comparative virtue of the ladies who were not expelled; but it was generally conceded that the real *casus belli* was political. "Is this a dashed Puritan meeting?" had asked the Colonel, savagely. "It's no Pike County shindig," had responded the floor-manager, cheerfully. "You're a Yank!" had screamed the Colonel, profanely qualifying the noun. "Get! you border ruffian," was the reply. Such at least was the substance of the reports. As, at that sincere epoch, expressions like the above were usually followed by prompt action, a fracas was confidently looked for.

Nothing, however, occurred. Colonel Starbottle made his appearance next day upon the streets with somewhat of his usual pomposity, a little restrained by the presence of his nephew, who accompanied him, and who, as a universal favourite, also exercised some restraint upon the curious and impertinent. But Culpepper's face wore a look of anxiety quite at variance with his usual grave repose. "The Don don't seem to take the old man's setback kindly," observed the sympathizing blacksmith. "P'r'aps he was sweet on Dolores himself," suggested the sceptical expressman.

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

It was a bright morning, a week after this occurrence, that Miss Jo Folinsbee stepped from her garden into the road. This time the latch did not click as she cautiously closed the gate behind her. After a moment's irresolution, which would have been awkward but that it was charmingly employed, after the manner of her sex, in adjusting a bow under a dimpled but rather prominent chin, and in pulling down the fingers of a neatly fitting glove, she tripped toward the settlement. Small wonder that a passing teamster drove his six mules into the wayside ditch and imperilled his load, to keep the dust from her spotless garments; small wonder that the "Lightning Express" withheld its speed and flash to let her pass, and that the expressman, who had never been known to exchange more than rapid monosyllables with his fellow-man, gazed after her with breathless admiration. For she was certainly attractive. In a country where the ornamental sex followed the example of youthful Nature, and were prone to overdress and glaring efflorescence, Miss Jo's simple and tasteful raiment added much to the physical charm of, if it did not actually suggest a sentiment to, her presence. It is said that Euchre-deck Billy, working in the gulch at the crossing, never saw Miss Folinsbee pass but that he always remarked apologetically to his partner, that "he believed he *must* write a letter home." Even Bill Masters, who saw her in Paris, presented to the favourable criticism of that most fastidious man, the late Emperor, said that she was stunning, but a big discount on what she was at Madroño Hollow.

It was still early morning, but the sun, with California extravagance, had already begun to beat hotly on the little chip hat and blue ribbons, and Miss Jo was obliged to seek the shade of a by-path.

ROMANCE OF MADROÑO HOLLOW

Here she received the timid advances of a vagabond yellow dog graciously, until, emboldened by his success, he insisted upon accompanying her, and, becoming slobberingly demonstrative, threatened her spotless skirt with his dusty paws, when she drove him from her with some slight acerbity, and a stone which haply fell within fifty feet of its destined mark. Having thus proved her ability to defend herself, with characteristic inconsistency she took a small panic, and, gathering her white skirts in one hand, and holding the brim of her hat over her eyes with the other, she ran swiftly at least a hundred yards before she stopped. Then she began picking some ferns and a few wild-flowers still spared to the withered fields, and then a sudden distrust of her small ankles seized her, and she inspected them narrowly for those burrs and bugs and snakes which are supposed to lie in wait for helpless womanhood. Then she plucked some golden heads of wild oats, and with a sudden inspiration placed them in her black hair, and then came quite unconsciously upon the trail leading to Madroño Hollow.

Here she hesitated. Before her ran the little trail, vanishing at last into the bosky depths below. The sun was very hot. She must be very far from home. Why should she not rest awhile under the shade of a madroño?

She answered these questions by going there at once. After thoroughly exploring the grove, and satisfying herself that it contained no other living human creature, she sat down under one of the largest trees, with a satisfactory little sigh. Miss Jo loved the madroño. It was a cleanly tree; no dust ever lay upon its varnished leaves; its immaculate shade never was known to harbour grub or insect.

She looked up at the rosy arms interlocked and

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

arched above her head. She looked down at the delicate ferns and cryptogams at her feet. Something glittered at the root of the tree. She picked it up; it was a bracelet. She examined it carefully for cipher or inscription; there was none. She could not resist a natural desire to clasp it on her arm, and to survey it from that advantageous view-point. This absorbed her attention for some moments; and when she looked up again she beheld at a little distance Culpepper Starbottle.

He was standing where he had halted, with instinctive delicacy, on first discovering her. Indeed, he had even deliberated whether he ought not to go away without disturbing her. But some fascination held him to the spot. Wonderful power of humanity! Far beyond jutted an outlying spur of the Sierra, vast, compact, and silent. Scarcely a hundred yards away, a league-long chasm dropped its sheer walls of granite a thousand feet. On every side rose up the serried ranks of pine-trees, in whose close-set files centuries of storm and change had wrought no breach. Yet all this seemed to Culpepper to have been planned by an all-wise Providence as the natural background to the figure of a pretty girl in a yellow dress.

Although Miss Jo had confidently expected to meet Culpepper somewhere in her ramble, now that he came upon her suddenly, she felt disappointed and embarrassed. His manner, too, was more than usually grave and serious, and more than ever seemed to jar upon that audacious levity which was this giddy girl's power and security in a society where all feeling was dangerous. As he approached her she rose to her feet, but almost before she knew it he had taken her hand and drawn her to a seat beside him. This was not what Miss Jo had expected,

132

ROMANCE OF MADROÑO HOLLOW

but nothing is so difficult to predicate as the exact preliminaries of a declaration of love.

What did Culpepper say? Nothing, I fear, that will add anything to the wisdom of the reader; nothing, I fear, that Miss Jo had not heard substantially from other lips before. But there was a certain conviction, fire-speed, and fury in the manner that was deliciously novel to the young lady. It was certainly something to be courted in the nineteenth century with all the passion and extravagance of the sixteenth; it was something to hear, amid the slang of a frontier society, the language of knight-errantry poured into her ear by this lantern-jawed, dark-browed descendant of the Cavaliers.

I do not know that there was anything more in it. The facts, however, go to show that at a certain point Miss Jo dropped her glove, and that in recovering it Culpepper possessed himself first of her hand and then her lips. When they stood up to go Culpepper had his arm around her waist, and her black hair, with its sheaf of golden oats, rested against the breast-pocket of his coat. But even then I do not think her fancy was entirely captive. She took a certain satisfaction in this demonstration of Culpepper's splendid height, and mentally compared it with a former flame, one Lieutenant McMirk, an active, but under-sized Hector, who subsequently fell a victim to the incautiously composed and monotonous beverages of a frontier garrison. Nor was she so much preoccupied but that her quick eyes, even while absorbing Culpepper's glances, were yet able to detect, at a distance, the figure of a man approaching. In an instant she slipped out of Culpepper's arm, and, whipping her hands behind her, said, "There's that horrid man!"

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

Culpepper looked up and beheld his respected uncle panting and blowing over the hill. His brow contracted as he turned to Miss Jo: "You don't like my uncle!"

"I hate him!" Miss Jo was recovering her ready tongue.

Culpepper blushed. He would have liked to enter upon some details of the Colonel's pedigree and exploits, but there was not time. He only smiled sadly. The smile melted Miss Jo. She held out her hand quickly, and said with even more than her usual effrontery, "Don't let that man get you into any trouble. Take care of yourself, dear, and don't let anything happen to you."

Miss Jo intended this speech to be pathetic; the tenure of life among her lovers had hitherto been very uncertain. Culpepper turned toward her, but she had already vanished in the thicket.

The Colonel came up panting. "I've looked all over town for you, and be dashed to you, sir. Who was that with you?"

"A lady." (Culpepper never lied, but he was discreet.)

"D—m 'em all! Look yar, Culp, I've spotted the man who gave the order to put me off the floor" ("flo" was what the Colonel said) "the other night!"

"Who was it?" asked Culpepper, listlessly.

"Jack Folinsbee."

"Who?"

"Why, the son of that dashed nigger-worshipping, psalm-singing Puritan Yankee. What's the matter, now? Look yar, Culp, you ain't goin' back on your blood, ar' ye? You ain't goin' back on your word? Ye ain't going down at the feet of this trash, like a whipped hound?"

ROMANCE OF MADROÑO HOLLOW

Culpepper was silent. He was very white. Presently he looked up and said quietly, "No."

Culpepper Starbottle had challenged Jack Folinsbee, and the challenge was accepted. The cause alleged was the expelling of Culpepper's uncle from the floor of the Assembly Hall by the order of Folinsbee. This much Madroño Hollow knew and could swear to; but there were other strange rumours afloat, of which the blacksmith was an able expounder. "You see, gentlemen," he said to the crowd gathered round his anvil, "I ain't got no theory of this affair, I only give a few facts as have come to my knowledge. Culpepper and Jack meets quite accidental like in Bob's saloon. Jack goes up to Culpepper and says, 'A word with you.' Culpepper bows, and steps aside in this way, Jack standing about *here*." (The blacksmith demonstrates the position of the parties with two old horseshoes on the anvil.) "Jack pulls a bracelet from his pocket, and says, 'Do you know that bracelet?' Culpepper says, 'I do not,' quite cool-like and easy. Jack says, 'You gave it to my sister,' Culpepper says, still cool as you please, 'I did not.' Jack says, 'You lie, G—d d—m you,' and draws his derringer. Culpepper jumps forward about *here*" (reference is made to the diagram) "and Jack fires. Nobody hit. It's a mighty cur'o's thing, gentlemen," continued the blacksmith, dropping suddenly into the abstract, and leaning meditatively on his anvil,— "it's a mighty cur'o's thing that nobody gets hit so often. You and me empties our revolvers sociably at each other over a little game, and the room full, and nobody gets hit! That's what gets me."

"Nevermind, Thompson," chimed in Bill Masters, "there's another and a better world where we shall

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

know all that, and—become better shots. Go on with your story.”

“Well, some grabs Culpepper and some grabs Jack, and so separates them. Then Jack tells ’em as how he had seen his sister wear a bracelet which he knew was one that had been given to Dolores by Colonel Starbottle. That Miss Jo wouldn’t say where she got it, but owned up to having seen Culpepper that day. Then the most cur’o’s thing of it yet, what does Culpepper do but rise up and takes all back that he said, and allows that he *did* give her the bracelet. Now my opinion, gentlemen, is that he lied; it ain’t like that man to give a gal that he respects anything off of that piece, Dolores. But it’s all the same, now, and there’s but one thing to be done.”

The way this one thing was done belongs to the record of Madroño Hollow. The morning was bright and clear; the air was slightly chill, but that was from the mist which arose along the banks of the river. As early as six o’clock the designated ground—a little opening in the Madroño grove—was occupied by Culpepper Starbottle, Colonel Starbottle, his second, and the surgeon. The Colonel was exalted and excited, albeit in a rather imposing, dignified way, and pointed out to the surgeon the excellence of the ground, which at that hour was wholly shaded from the sun, whose steady stare is more or less discomposing to your duellist. The surgeon threw himself on the grass and smoked his cigar. Culpepper, quiet and thoughtful, leaned against a tree and gazed up the river. There was a strange suggestion of a picnic about the group, which was heightened when the Colonel drew a bottle from his coat-tails, and, taking a preliminary draught, offered it to the others. “Cock-tails, sir,”

ROMANCE OF MADROÑO HOLLOW

he explained with dignified precision. "A gentleman, sir, should never be without 'em. Keeps off the morning chill. I remember going out in '53 with Hank Boompirater. Good ged, sir, the man had to put on his overcoat, and was shot in it. Fact."

But the noise of wheels drowned the Colonel's reminiscences, and a rapidly driven buggy, containing Jack Folinsbee, Calhoun Bungstarter, his second, and Bill Masters, drew up on the ground. Jack Folinsbee leaped out gaily. "I had the jolliest work to get away without the governor's hearing," he began, addressing the group before him with the greatest volubility. Calhoun Bungstarter touched his arm, and the young man blushed. It was his first duel.

"If you are ready, gentlemen," said Mr. Bungstarter, "we had better proceed to business. I believe it is understood that no apology will be offered or accepted. We may as well settle preliminaries at once, or I fear we shall be interrupted. There is a rumour in town that the Vigilance Committee are seeking our friends the Starbottles, and I believe, as their fellow-countryman, I have the honour to be included in their warrant."

At this probability of interruption, that gravity which had hitherto been wanting fell upon the group. The preliminaries were soon arranged, and the principals placed in position. Then there was a silence.

To a spectator from the hill, impressed with the picnic suggestion, what might have been the popping of two champagne corks broke the stillness.

Culpepper had fired in the air. Colonel Starbottle uttered a low curse. Jack Folinsbee sulkily demanded another shot.

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

Again the parties stood opposed to each other. Again the word was given, and what seemed to be the simultaneous report of both pistols rose upon the air. But after an interval of a few seconds all were surprised to see Culpepper slowly raise his unexploded weapon and fire it harmlessly above his head. Then, throwing the pistol upon the ground, he walked to a tree and leaned silently against it.

Jack Folinsbee flew into a paroxysm of fury. Colonel Starbottle raved and swore. Mr. Bungstarter was properly shocked at their conduct. "Really, gentlemen, if Mr. Culpepper Starbottle declines another shot, I do not see how we can proceed."

But the Colonel's blood was up, and Jack Folinsbee was equally implacable. A hurried consultation ensued, which ended by Colonel Starbottle taking his nephew's place as principal, Bill Masters acting as second, *vice* Mr. Bungstarter, who declined all further connection with the affair.

Two distinct reports rang through the Hollow. Jack Folinsbee dropped his smoking pistol, took a step forward, and then dropped heavily upon his face.

In a moment the surgeon was at his side. The confusion was heightened by the trampling of hoofs, and the voice of the blacksmith bidding them flee for their lives before the coming storm. A moment more and the ground was cleared, and the surgeon, looking up, beheld only the white face of Culpepper bending over him.

"Can you save him?"

"I cannot say. Hold up his head a moment, while I run to the buggy."

Culpepper passed his arm tenderly around the

ROMANCE OF MADROÑO HOLLOW

neck of the insensible man. Presently the surgeon returned with some stimulants.

“There, that will do, Mr. Starbottle, thank you. Now my advice is to get away from here while you can. I’ll look after Folinsbee. Do you hear?”

Culpepper’s arm was still round the neck of his late foe, but his head had drooped and fallen on the wounded man’s shoulder. The surgeon looked down, and, catching sight of his face, stooped and lifted him gently in his arms. He opened his coat and waistcoat. There was blood upon his shirt, and a bullet-hole in his breast. He had been shot unto death at the first fire.

HOW SANTA CLAUS CAME TO SIMPSON'S BAR

IT had been raining in the valley of the Sacramento. The North Fork had overflowed its banks and Rattlesnake Creek was impassable. The few boulders that had marked the summer ford at Simpson's Crossing were obliterated by a vast sheet of water stretching to the foothills. The up stage was stopped at Grangers; the last mail had been abandoned in the *tules*, the rider swimming for his life. "An area," remarked the *Sierra Avalanche*, with pensive local pride, "as large as the State of Massachusetts is now under water."

Nor was the weather any better in the foothills. The mud lay deep on the mountain road; wagons that neither physical force nor moral objurgation could move from the evil ways into which they had fallen, encumbered the track, and the way to Simpson's Bar was indicated by broken-down teams and hard swearing. And farther on, 'cut off and inaccessible, rained upon and bedraggled, smitten by high winds and threatened by high water, Simpson's Bar, on the eve of Christmas Day, 1862, clung like a swallow's nest to the rocky entablature and splintered capitals of Table Mountain, and shook in the blast.

As night shut down on the settlement, a few lights gleamed through the mist from the windows of cabins on either side of the highway now crossed and gullied by lawless streams and swept by marauding winds. Happily most of the population were gathered at Thompson's store, clustered around a red-hot stove, at which they silently spat in some accepted sense of social communion that perhaps rendered conversation unnecessary. Indeed, most methods of diversion had long since been exhausted

SIMPSON'S BAR

on Simpson's Bar ; high water had suspended the regular occupations on gulch and on river, and a consequent lack of money and whisky had taken the zest from most illegitimate recreations. Even Mr. Hamlin was fain to leave the Bar with fifty dollars in his pocket,—the only amount actually realized of the large sums won by him in the successful exercise of his arduous profession. "Ef I was asked," he remarked somewhat later,—“ef I was asked to pint out a purty little village where a retired sport as didn't care for money could exercise hissself frequent and lively, I'd say Simpson's Bar ; but for a young man with a large family depending on his exertions, it don't pay.” As Mr. Hamlin's family consisted mainly of female adults, this remark is quoted rather to show the breadth of his humour than the exact extent of his responsibilities.

Howbeit, the unconscious objects of this satire sat that evening in the listless apathy begotten of idleness and lack of excitement. Even the sudden splashing of hoofs before the door did not arouse them. Dick Bullen alone paused in the act of scraping out his pipe, and lifted his head, but no other one of the group indicated any interest in, or recognition of, the man who entered.

It was a figure familiar enough to the company, and known in Simpson's Bar as "The Old Man." A man of perhaps fifty years ; grizzled and scant of hair, but still fresh and youthful of complexion. A face full of ready but not very powerful sympathy, with a chameleon-like aptitude for taking on the shade and colour of contiguous moods and feelings. He had evidently just left some hilarious companions, and did not at first notice the gravity of the group, but clapped the shoulder of the nearest man jocularly and threw himself into a vacant chair.

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

"Jest heard the best thing out, boys! Ye know Smiley, over yar,—Jim Smiley,—the funniest man in the Bar? Well, Jim was jest telling the richest yarn about—"

"Smiley's a —— fool," interrupted a gloomy voice.

"A particular —— skunk," added another, in sepulchral accents.

A silence followed these positive statements. The Old Man glanced quickly round the group. Then his face slowly changed. "That's so," he said reflectively, after a pause, "certingly a sort of skunk and suthin of a fool. In course." He was silent for a moment as in painful contemplation of the unsavouriness and folly of the unpopular Smiley. "Dismal weather, ain't it?" he added, now fully embarked on the current of prevailing sentiment. "Mighty rough papers on the boys, and no show for money this season. And to-morrow's Christmas."

There was a movement among the men at this announcement, but whether of satisfaction or disgust was not plain. "Yes," continued the Old Man, in the lugubrious tone he had, within the last few moments, unconsciously adopted,—"yes, Christmas, and to-night's Christmas Eve. Ye see, boys, I kinder thought—that is, I sorter had an idee, jest passin' like, you know—that may be ye'd all like to come over to my house to-night and have a sort of tear round. But I suppose, now, you wouldn't? Don't feel like it, may be?" he added with anxious sympathy, peering into the faces of his companions.

"Well, I don't know," responded Tom Flynn, with some cheerfulness. "P'r'aps we may. But how about your wife, Old Man? What does *she* say to it?"

The Old Man hesitated. His conjugal experience

SIMPSON'S BAR

had not been a happy one, and the fact was known to Simpson's Bar. His first wife, a delicate, pretty little woman, had suffered keenly and secretly from the jealous suspicions of her husband, until one day he invited the whole Bar to his house to expose her infidelity. On arriving, the party found the shy, *petite* creature quietly engaged in her household duties, and retired abashed and discomfited. But the sensitive woman did not easily recover from the shock of this extraordinary outrage. It was with difficulty she regained her equanimity sufficiently to release her lover from the closet in which he was concealed and escape with him. She left a boy of three years to comfort her bereaved husband. The Old Man's present wife had been his cook. She was large, loyal, and aggressive.

Before he could reply, Joe Dimmick suggested with great directness that it was the "Old Man's house," and that, invoking the Divine Power, if the case were his own, he would invite whom he pleased, even if in so doing he imperilled his salvation. The Powers of Evil, he further remarked, should contend against him vainly. All this delivered with a terseness and vigour lost in this necessary translation.

"In course. Certainly. Thet's it," said the Old Man with a sympathetic frown. "Thar's no trouble about *thet*. It's my own house, built every stick on it myself. Don't you be afeard o' her, boys. She *may* cut up a trifle rough,—ez wimmin do,—but she'll come round." Secretly the Old Man trusted to the exaltation of liquor and the power of courageous example to sustain him in such an emergency.

As yet, Dick Bullen, the oracle and leader of Simpson's Bar, had not spoken. He now took his pipe from his lips. "Old Man, how's that yer Johnny

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

gettin' on? Seems to me he didn't look so peart last time I seed him on the bluff heavin' rocks at Chinamen. Didn't seem to take much interest in it. Thar was a gang of 'em by yar yesterday,—drownded out up the river,—and I kinder thought o' Johnny, and how he'd miss 'em! May be now, we'd be in the way ef he wus sick?"

The father, evidently touched not only by this pathetic picture of Johnny's deprivation, but by the considerate delicacy of the speaker, hastened to assure him that Johnny was better and that a "little fun might 'liven him up." Whereupon Dick arose, shook himself, and saying, "I'm ready. Lead the way, Old Man: here goes," himself led the way with a leap, a characteristic howl, and darted out into the night. As he passed through the outer room he caught up a blazing brand from the hearth. The action was repeated by the rest of the party, closely following and elbowing each other, and before the astonished proprietor of Thompson's grocery was aware of the intention of his guests the room was deserted.

The night was pitchy dark. In the first gust of wind their temporary torches were extinguished, and only the red brands dancing and flitting in the gloom like drunken will-o'-the-wisps indicated their whereabouts. Their way led up Pine-Tree Cañon, at the head of which a broad, low, bark-thatched cabin burrowed in the mountain-side. It was the home of the Old Man, and the entrance to the tunnel in which he worked when he worked at all. Here the crowd paused for a moment, out of delicate deference to their host, who came up panting in the rear.

"P'raps ye'd better hold on a second out yer, whilst I go in and see that things is all right," said

SIMPSON'S BAR

the Old Man, with an indifference he was far from feeling. The suggestion was graciously accepted, the door opened and closed on the host, and the crowd, leaning their backs against the wall and cowering under the eaves, waited and listened.

For a few moments there was no sound but the dripping of water from the eaves, and the stir and rustle of wrestling boughs above them. Then the men became uneasy, and whispered suggestion and suspicion passed from one to the other. "Reckon she's caved in his head at the first lick!" "Decoyed him inter the tunnel and barred him up likely." "Got him down and sittin' on him." "Probably bilin' suthin to heave on us; stand clear the door, boys!" For just then the latch clicked, the door slowly opened, and a voice said, "Come in out o' the wet."

The voice was neither that of the Old Man nor of his wife. It was the voice of a small boy, its weak treble broken by that preternatural hoarseness which only vagabondage and the habit of premature self-assertion can give. It was the face of a small boy that looked up at theirs,—a face that might have been pretty and even refined but that it was darkened by evil knowledge from within, and dirt and hard experience from without. He had a blanket around his shoulders, and had evidently just risen from his bed. "Come in," he repeated, "and don't make no noise. The Old Man's in there talking to mar," he continued, pointing to an adjacent room which seemed to be a kitchen, from which the Old Man's voice came in deprecating accents. "Let me be," he added, querulously, to Dick Bullen, who had caught him up, blanket and all, and was affecting to toss him into the fire, "let go o' me, you d—d old fool, d'ye hear?"

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

Thus adjured, Dick Bullen lowered Johnny to the ground with a smothered laugh, while the men, entering quietly, ranged themselves around a long table of rough boards which occupied the centre of the room. Johnny then gravely proceeded to a cupboard and brought several articles which he deposited on the table. "Thar's whisky. And crackers. And red herons. And cheese." He took a bite of the latter on his way to the table. "And sugar." He scooped up a mouthful *en route* with a small and very dirty hand. "And terbacker. Thar's dried appils, too, on the shelf, but I don't admire 'em. Appils is swellin'. Thar," he concluded, "now wade in, and don't be afeard. I don't mind the old woman. She don't belong to *me*. S'long."

He had stepped to the threshold of a small room, scarcely larger than a closet, partitioned off from the main apartment, and holding in its dim recess a small bed. He stood there a moment looking at the company, his bare feet peeping from the blanket, and nodded.

"Hello, Johnny! You ain't goin' to turn in agin, are ye?" said Dick.

"Yes, I are," responded Johnny, decidedly.

"Why, wot's up, old fellow?"

"I'm sick."

"How sick?"

"I've got a fevier. And chilblains. And room-atiz," returned Johnny, and vanished within. After a moment's pause, he added in the dark, apparently from under the bed-clothes,— "And biles!"

There was an embarrassing silence. The men looked at each other, and at the fire. Even with the appetising banquet before them, it seemed as if they might again fall into the despondency of Thompson's grocery, when the voice of the Old

SIMPSON'S BAR

Man, incautiously lifted, came deprecatingly from the kitchen.

"Certainly! Thet's so. In course they is. A gang o' lazy drunken loafers, and that ar Dick Bullen's the ornariest of all. Didn't heve no more *sabe* than to come round yar with sickness in the house and no provision. Thet's what I said: 'Bullen,' sez I, 'It's crazy drunk you are, or a fool,' sez I, 'to think o' such a thing.' 'Staples,' I sez, 'be you a man, Staples, and 'spect to raise h—ll under my roof and invalids lyin' round?' But they would come,—they would. Thet's what you must 'spect o' such trash as lays round the Bar."

A burst of laughter from the men followed this unfortunate exposure. Whether it was overheard in the kitchen, or whether the Old Man's irate companion had just then exhausted all other modes of expressing her contemptuous indignation, I cannot say, but a back door was suddenly slammed with great violence. A moment later and the Old Man reappeared, haply unconscious of the cause of the late hilarious outburst, and smiled blandly.

"The old woman thought she'd just run over to Mrs. McFadden's for a sociable call," he explained, with jaunty indifference, as he took a seat at the board.

Oddly enough it needed this untoward incident to relieve the embarrassment that was beginning to be felt by the party, and their natural audacity returned with their host. I do not propose to record the convivialities of that evening. The inquisitive reader will accept the statement that the conversation was characterized by the same intellectual exaltation, the same cautious reverence, the same fastidious delicacy, the same rhetorical precision, and the same logical and coherent discourse

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

somewhat later in the evening, which distinguish similar gatherings of the masculine sex in more civilized localities and under more favourable auspices. No glasses were broken in the absence of any; no liquor was uselessly spilt on floor or table in the scarcity of that article.

It was nearly midnight when the festivities were interrupted. "Hush," said Dick Bullen, holding up his hand. It was the querulous voice of Johnny from his adjacent closet: "O dad!"

The Old Man arose hurriedly and disappeared in the closet. Presently he reappeared. "His rheumatiz is coming on agin bad," he explained, "and he wants rubbin'." He lifted the demijohn of whisky from the table and shook it. It was empty. Dick Bullen put down his tin cup with an embarrassed laugh. So did the others. The Old Man examined their contents and said hopefully, "I reckon that's enough; he don't need much. You hold on, allo' you, for a spell, and I'll be back"; and vanished in the closet with an old flannel shirt and the whisky. The door closed but imperfectly, and the following dialogue was distinctly audible:—

"Now, sonny, whar does she ache worst?"

"Sometimes over yer and sometimes under yer; but it's most powerful from yer to yer. Rub yer, dad."

A silence seemed to indicate a brisk rubbing. Then Johnny:

"Hevin' a good time out yer, dad?"

"Yes, sonny."

"To-morrer's Chrissmiss,—ain't it?"

"Yes, sonny. How does she feel now?"

"Better. Rub a little further down. Wot's Chrissmiss, anyway? Wot's it all about?"

"O, it's a day."

SIMPSON'S BAR

This exhaustive definition was apparently satisfactory, for there was a silent interval of rubbing. Presently Johnny again:

"Mar sez that everywhere else but yer everybody gives things to everybody Chrissmiss, and then she jist waded inter you. She sez thar's a man they call Sandy Claws, not a white man, you know, but a kind o' Chinemin, comes down the chimbley night afore Chrissmiss and gives things to chillern,—boys like me. Put's 'em in their butes! Thet's what she tried to play upon me. Easy now, pop, whar are you rubbin' to,—thet's a mile from the place. She jest made that up, didn't she, jest to aggrawate me and you? Don't rub thar. . . . Why, dad!"

In the great quiet that seemed to have fallen upon the house the sigh of the near pines and the drip of leaves without was very distinct. Johnny's voice, too, was lowered as he went on, "Don't you take on now, fur I'm gettin' all right fast. Wot's the boys doin' out thar?"

The Old Man partly opened the door and peered through. His guests were sitting there sociably enough, and there were a few silver coins and a lean buckskin purse on the table. "Bettin' on suthin,—some little game or 'nother. They're all right," he replied to Johnny, and recommenced his rubbing.

"I'd like to take a hand and win some money," said Johnny, reflectively, after a pause.

The Old Man glibly repeated what was evidently a familiar formula, that if Johnny would wait until he struck it rich in the tunnel he'd have lots of money, etc. etc.

"Yes," said Johnny, "but you don't. And whether you strike it and I win it, it's about the same. It's all luck. But it's mighty cur'o's about Chrissmiss,—ain't it? Why do they call it Chrissmiss?"

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

Perhaps for some instinctive deference to the over-hearing of his guests, or from some vague sense of incongruity, the Old Man's reply was so low as to be inaudible beyond the room.

"Yes," said Johnny, with some slight abatement of interest, "I've heerd o' *him* before. Thar, that'll do, dad. I don't ache near so bad as I did. Now wrap me tight in this yer blanket. So. Now," he added in a muffled whisper, "sit down yer by me till I go asleep." To assure himself of obedience, he disengaged one hand from the blanket and, grasping his father's sleeve, again composed himself to rest.

For some moments the Old Man waited patiently. Then the unwonted stillness of the house excited his curiosity, and without moving from the bed, he cautiously opened the door with his disengaged hand, and looked into the main room. To his infinite surprise it was dark and deserted. But even then a smouldering log on the hearth broke, and by the upspringing blaze he saw the figure of Dick Bullen sitting by the dying embers.

"Hello!"

Dick started, rose, and came somewhat unsteadily toward him.

"Whar's the boys?" said the Old Man.

"Gone up the cañon on a little *pasear*. They're coming back for me in a minit. I'm waitin' round for 'em. What are you starin' at, Old Man?" he added, with a forced laugh; "do you think I'm drunk?"

The Old Man might have been pardoned the supposition, for Dick's eyes were humid and his face flushed. He loitered and lounged back to the chimney, yawned, shook himself, buttoned up his coat, and laughed. "Liquor ain't so plenty as that, Old Man. Now don't you git up," he continued, as the

150

SIMPSON'S BAR

Old Man made a movement to release his sleeve from Johnny's hand. "Don't you mind manners. Sit jest whar you be! I'm goin' in a jiffy. Thar, that's them now."

There was a low tap at the door. Dick Bullen opened it quickly, nodded "Good night" to his host, and disappeared. The Old Man would have followed him but for the hand that still unconsciously grasped his sleeve. He could have easily disengaged it; it was small, weak, and emaciated. But perhaps because it *was* small, weak, and emaciated, he changed his mind, and, drawing his chair closer to the bed, rested his head upon it. In this defenceless attitude the potency of his earlier potations surprised him. The room flickered and faded before his eyes, reappeared, faded again, went out, and left him—asleep.

Meantime Dick Bullen, closing the door, confronted his companions. "Are you ready!" said Staples. "Ready," said Dick; "what's the time?" "Past twelve," was the reply; "can you make it?—it's nigh on fifty miles, the round trip hither and yon." "I reckon," returned Dick, shortly. "Whar's the mare?" "Bill and Jack's holdin' her at the crossin'." "Let 'em hold on a minit longer," replied Dick.

He turned and re-entered the house softly. By the light of the guttering candle and dying fire he saw that the door of the little room was open. He stepped toward it on tiptoe and looked in. The Old Man had fallen back in his chair, snoring, his helpless feet thrust out in a line with his collapsed shoulders, and his hat pulled over his eyes. Beside him, on a narrow wooden bedstead, lay Johnny, muffled tightly in a blanket that hid all save a strip of forehead and a few curls damp with perspiration. Dick Bullen

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

made a step forward, hesitated, and glanced over his shoulder into the deserted room. Everything was quiet. With a sudden resolution he parted his huge moustaches with both hands and stooped over the sleeping boy. But even as he did so a mischievous blast, lying in wait, swooped down the chimney, rekindled the hearth, and lit up the room with a shameless glow from which Dick fled in bashful terror.

His companions were already waiting for him at the crossing. Two of them were struggling in the darkness with some strange misshapen bulk, which as Dick came nearer took the semblance of a great yellow horse.

It was the mare. She was not a pretty picture; from her Roman nose to her rising haunches, from her arched spine, hidden by the stiff *machillas* of a Mexican saddle, to her thick, straight, bony legs, there was not a line of equine grace. In her half-blind but wholly vicious white eyes, in her protruding under lip, in her monstrous colour, there was nothing but ugliness and vice.

"Now then," said Staples, "stand cl'ar of her heels, boys, and up with you. Don't miss your first hold of her mane, and mind ye get your off stirrup quick. Ready!"

There was a leap, a scrambling struggle, a bound, a wild retreat of the crowd, a circle of flying hoofs, two springless leaps that jarred the earth, a rapid play and jingle of spurs, a plunge, and then the voice of Dick somewhere in the darkness, "All right!"

"Don't take the lower road back onless you're hard pushed for time! Don't hold her in down hill! We'll be at the ford at five! G'lang Hoopa! Mula! GO!"

SIMPSON'S BAR

A splash, a spark struck from the ledge in the road, a clatter in the rock cut beyond, and Dick was gone.

* * * * *

Sing, O Muse, the ride of Richard Bullen! Sing, O Muse, of chivalrous men! the sacred quest, the doughty deeds, the battery of low churls, the fear-some ride and gruesome perils of the Flower of Simpson's Bar! Alack! she is dainty, this Muse! She will have none of this bucking brute and swaggering, ragged rider, and I must fain follow him in prose afoot!

It was one o'clock, and yet he had only gained Rattlesnake Hill. For in that time Jovita had rehearsed to him all her imperfections and practised all her vices. Thrice had she stumbled. Twice had she thrown up her Roman nose in a straight line with the reins, and, resisting bit and spur, struck out madly across country. Twice had she reared, and, rearing, fallen backward; and twice had the agile Dick, unharmed, regained his seat before she found her vicious legs again. And a mile beyond them, at the foot of a long hill, was Rattlesnake Creek. Dick knew that here was the crucial test of his ability to perform his enterprise, set his teeth grimly, put his knees well into her flanks, and changed his defensive tactics to brisk aggression. Bullied and maddened, Jovita began the descent of the hill. Here the artful Richard pretended to hold her in with ostentatious objurgation and well-feigned cries of alarm. It is unnecessary to add that Jovita instantly ran away. Nor need I state the time made in the descent; it is written in the chronicles of Simpson's Bar. Enough that in another moment, as it seemed to Dick, she was splashing on the

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

overflowed banks of Rattlesnake Creek. As Dick expected, the momentum she had acquired carried her beyond the point of balking, and, holding her well together for a mighty leap, they dashed into the middle of the swiftly flowing current. A few moments of kicking, wading, and swimming, and Dick drew a long breath on the opposite bank.

The road from Rattlesnake Creek to Red Mountain was tolerably level. Either the plunge in Rattlesnake Creek had dampened her baleful fire, or the art which led to it had shown her the superior wickedness of her rider, for Jovita no longer wasted her surplus energy in wanton conceits. Once she bucked, but it was from force of habit; once she shied, but it was from a new, freshly painted meeting-house at the crossing of the country road. Hollows, ditches, gravelly deposits, patches of freshly springing grasses, flew from beneath her rattling hoofs. She began to smell unpleasantly, once or twice she coughed slightly, but there was no abatement of her strength or speed. By two o'clock he had passed Red Mountain and begun the descent to the plain. Ten minutes later the driver of the fast Pioneer coach was overtaken and passed by a "man on a Pinto hoss,"—an event sufficiently notable for remark. At half-past two Dick rose in his stirrups with a great shout. Stars were glittering through the rifted clouds, and beyond him, out of the plain, rose two spires, a flagstaff, and straggling line of black objects. Dick jingled his spurs and swung his *riata*, Jovita bounded forward, and in another moment they swept into Tuttleville and drew up before the wooden piazza of "The Hotel of All Nations."

What transpired that night at Tuttleville is not strictly a part of this record. Briefly I may state,
154

SIMPSON'S BAR

however, that after Jovita had been handed over to a sleepy hostler, whom she at once kicked into unpleasant consciousness, Dick sallied out with the bar-keeper for a tour of the sleeping town. Lights still gleamed from a few saloons and gambling-houses; but, avoiding these, they stopped before several closed shops, and by persistent tapping and judicious outcry roused the proprietors from their beds, and made them unbar the doors of their magazines and expose their wares. Sometimes they were met by curses, but oftener by interest and some concern in their needs, and the interview was invariably concluded by a drink. It was three o'clock before this pleasantry was given over, and with a small waterproof bag of indiarubber strapped on his shoulders Dick returned to the hotel. But here he was waylaid by Beauty,—Beauty opulent in charms, affluent in dress, persuasive in speech, and Spanish in accent! In vain she repeated the invitation in "Excelsior," happily scorned by all Alpine-climbing youth, and rejected by this child of the Sierras,—a rejection softened in this instance by a laugh and his last gold coin. And then he sprang to the saddle and dashed down the lonely street and out into the lonelier plain, where presently the lights, the black line of houses, the spires, and the flagstaff sank into the earth behind him again and were lost in the distance.

The storm had cleared away, the air was brisk and cold, the outlines of adjacent landmarks were distinct, but it was half-past four before Dick reached the meeting-house and the crossing of the country road. To avoid the rising grade he had taken a longer and more circuitous road, in whose viscid mud Jovita sank fetlock deep at every bound. It was a poor preparation for a steady ascent of five

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

miles more; but Jovita, gathering her legs under her, took it with her usual blind, unreasoning fury, and a half-hour later reached the long level that led to the Rattlesnake Creek. Another half-hour would bring him to the creek. He threw the reins lightly upon the neck of the mare, chirruped to her, and began to sing.

Suddenly Jovita shied with a bound that would have unseated a less practised rider. Hanging to her rein was a figure that had leaped from the bank, and at the same time from the road before her arose a shadowy horse and rider. "Throw up your hands," commanded this second apparition, with an oath.

Dick felt the mare tremble, quiver, and apparently sink under him. He knew what it meant, and was prepared.

"Stand aside, Jack Simpson, I know you, you d—d thief. Let me pass or——"

He did not finish the sentence. Jovita rose straight in the air with a terrific bound, throwing the figure from her bit with a single shake of her vicious head, and charged with deadly malevolence down on the impediment before her. An oath, a pistol-shot, horse and highwayman rolled over in the road, and the next moment Jovita was a hundred yards away. But the good right arm of her rider, shattered by a bullet, dropped helplessly by his side.

Without slacking his speed he shifted the reins to his left hand. But a few moments later he was obliged to halt and tighten the saddle-girths that had slipped in the onset. This in his crippled condition took some time. He had no fear of pursuit, but looking up he saw that the eastern stars were already paling, and that the distant peaks had lost their ghostly whiteness, and now stood out blackly against a lighter sky. Day was upon him. Then

SIMPSON'S BAR

completely absorbed in a single idea, he forgot the pain of his wound, and mounting again dashed on towards Rattlesnake Creek. But now Jovita's breath came broken by gasps, Dick reeled in his saddle, and brighter and brighter grew the sky.

Ride, Richard; run, Jovita; linger, O day!

For the last few rods there was a roaring in his ears. Was it exhaustion from loss of blood, or what? He was dazed and giddy as he swept down the hill, and did not recognize his surroundings. Had he taken the wrong road, or was this Rattlesnake Creek?

It was. But the brawling creek he had swum a few hours before had risen, more than doubled its volume, and now rolled, a swift and resistless river, between him and Rattlesnake Hill. For the first time that night Richard's heart sank within him. The river, the mountain, the quickening east, swam before his eyes. He shut them to recover his self-control. In that brief interval, by some fantastic mental process, the little room at Simpson's Bar and the figures of the sleeping father and son rose upon him. He opened his eyes wildly, cast off his coat, pistol, boots, and saddle, bound his precious pack tightly to his shoulders, grasped the bare flanks of Jovita with his bared knees, and with a shout dashed into the yellow water. A cry rose from the opposite bank as the head of a man and horse struggled for a few moments against the battling current, and then were swept away amidst uprooted trees and whirling drift-wood.

* * * *

The old man started and woke. The fire on the hearth was dead, the candle in the outer room flickering in its socket, and somebody was rapping at the door. He opened it, but fell back with a cry

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

before the dripping, half-naked figure that reeled against the doorpost. "Dick?"

"Hush! Is he awake yet?"

"No—but, Dick?"

"Dry up, you old fool! Get me some whisky, *quick!*" The old man flew and returned with—an empty bottle! Dick would have sworn, but his strength was not equal to the occasion. He staggered, caught at the handle of the door, and motioned to the Old Man.

"Thar's suthin' in my pack yer for Johnny. Take it off. I can't."

The Old Man unstrapped the pack and laid it before the exhausted man.

"Open it, quick!"

He did so with trembling fingers. It contained only a few poor toys,—cheap and barbaric enough, goodness knows, but bright with paint and tinsel. One of them was broken; another, I fear, was irretrievably ruined by water; and on the third—ah me! there was a cruel spot.

"It don't look like much, that's a fact," said Dick, ruefully. . . . "But it's the best we could do. . . . Take 'em, Old Man, and put 'em in his stocking, and tell him—tell him—you know—hold me, Old Man—" The Old Man caught at his sinking figure. "Tell him," said Dick, with a weak little laugh—"tell him Sandy Claus has come."

And even so, bedraggled, ragged, unshaven, and unshorn, with one arm hanging helplessly at his side, Santa Claus came to Simpson's Bar and fell fainting on the first threshold. The Christmas dawn came slowly after, touching the remoter peaks with the rosy warmth of ineffable love. And it looked so tenderly on Simpson's Bar that the whole mountain, as if caught in a generous action, blushed to the skies.

THE ILIAD OF SANDY BAR

BEFORE nine o'clock it was pretty well known all along the river that the two parties of the "Amity Claim" had quarrelled and separated at daybreak. At that time the attention of their nearest neighbour had been attracted by the sounds of altercations and two consecutive pistol-shots. Running out, he had seen, dimly, in the grey mist that rose from the river, the tall form of Scott, one of the partners, descending the hill toward the cañon; a moment later, York, the other partner, had appeared from the cabin, and walked in an opposite direction toward the river, passing within a few feet of the curious watcher. Later it was discovered that a serious Chinaman, cutting wood before the cabin, had witnessed part of the quarrel. But John was stolid, indifferent, and reticent. "Me choppee wood, me no fightee," was his serene response to all anxious queries. "But what did they say, John?" John did not *sabe*. Colonel Starbottle deftly ran over the various popular epithets which a generous public sentiment might accept as reasonable provocation for an assault. But John did not recognize them. "And this yer's the cattle," said the Colonel, with some severity, "that some thinks oughter be allowed to testify ag'n a White Man! Git—you heathen!"

Still the quarrel remained inexplicable. That two men, whose amiability and grave tact had earned for them the title of "The Peacemakers," in a community not greatly given to the passive virtues,—that these men, singularly devoted to each other, should suddenly and violently quarrel, might well excite the curiosity of the camp. A few of the more inquisitive visited the late scene of conflict,

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

now deserted by its former occupants. There was no trace of disorder or confusion in the neat cabin. The rude table was arranged as if for breakfast; the pan of yellow biscuit still sat upon that hearth whose dead embers might have typified the evil passions that had raged there but an hour before. But Colonel Starbottle's eye—albeit somewhat bloodshot and rheumy—was more intent on practical details. On examination, a bullet-hole was found in the door-post, and another, nearly opposite in the casing of the window. The Colonel called attention to the fact that the one "agreed with" the bore of Scott's revolver, and the other with that of York's derringer. "They must hev stood about yer," said the Colonel, taking position; "not mor'n three feet apart, and—missed!" There was a fine touch of pathos in the falling inflection of the Colonel's voice, which was not without effect. A delicate perception of wasted opportunity thrilled his auditors.

But the Bar was destined to experience a greater disappointment. The two antagonists had not met since the quarrel, and it was vaguely rumoured that, on the occasion of a second meeting, each had determined to kill the other "on sight." There was, consequently, some excitement—and, it is to be feared, no little gratification—when, at ten o'clock, York stepped from the Magnolia Saloon into the one long straggling street of the camp, at the same moment that Scott left the blacksmith's shop at the forks of the road. It was evident, at a glance, that a meeting could only be avoided by the actual retreat of one or the other.

In an instant the doors and windows of the adjacent saloons were filled with faces. Heads unaccountably appeared above the river banks and

THE ILIAD OF SANDY BAR

from behind boulders. An empty wagon at the cross-road was suddenly crowded with people, who seemed to have sprung from the earth. There was much running and confusion on the hillside. On the mountain-road, Mr. Jack Hamlin had reined up his horse, and was standing upright on the seat of his buggy. And the two objects of this absorbing attention approached each other.

"York's got the sun," "Scott'll line him on that tree," "He's waiting to draw his fire," came from the cart; and then it was silent. But above this human breathlessness the river rushed and sang, and the wind rustled the tree-tops with an indifference that seemed obtrusive. Colonel Starbottle felt it, and in a moment of sublime preoccupation, without looking around, waved his cane behind him, warningly to all nature, and said, "Shu!"

The men were now within a few feet of each other. A hen ran across the road before one of them. A feathery seed vessel, wafted from a wayside tree, fell at the feet of the other. And, unheeding this irony of nature, the two opponents came nearer, erect and rigid, looked in each other's eyes, and—passed!

Colonel Starbottle had to be lifted from the cart. "This yer camp is played out," he said gloomily, as he affected to be supported into the Magnolia. With what further expression he might have indicated his feelings it was impossible to say, for at that moment Scott joined the group. "Did you speak to me?" he asked of the Colonel, dropping his hand, as if with accidental familiarity, on that gentleman's shoulder. The Colonel, recognizing some occult quality in the touch, and some unknown quantity in the glance of his questioner, contented himself by replying, "No, sir," with dignity. A few rods away, York's conduct was as

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

characteristic and peculiar. "You had a mighty fine chance; why didn't you plump him!" said Jack Hamlin, as York drew near the buggy. "Because I hate him," was the reply, heard only by Jack. Contrary to popular belief, this reply was not hissed between the lips of the speaker, but was said in an ordinary tone. But Jack Hamlin, who was an observer of mankind, noticed that the speaker's hands were cold, and his lips dry, as he helped him into the buggy, and accepted the seeming paradox with a smile.

When Sandy Bar became convinced that the quarrel between York and Scott could not be settled after the usual local methods, it gave no further concern thereto. But presently it was rumoured that the "Amity Claim" was in litigation, and that its possession would be expensively disputed by each of the partners. As it was well known that the claim in question was "worked out" and worthless, and that the partners, whom it had already enriched, had talked of abandoning it but a day or two before the quarrel, this proceeding could only be accounted for as gratuitous spite. Later, two San Francisco lawyers made their appearance in this guileless Arcadia, and were eventually taken into the saloons, and—what was pretty much the same thing—the confidences of the inhabitants. The results of this unhallowed intimacy were many subpoenas; and, indeed, when the "Amity Claim" came to trial, all of Sandy Bar that was not in compulsory attendance at the county seat came there from curiosity. The gulches and ditches for miles around were deserted. I do not propose to describe that already famous trial. Enough that, in the language of the plaintiff's counsel, "it was one of no ordinary significance, involving the inherent

162

THE ILIAD OF SANDY BAR

rights of that untiring industry which had developed the Pactolian resources of this golden land"; and, in the homelier phrase of Colonel Starbottle, "A fuss that gentlemen might hev settled in ten minutes over a social glass, ef they meant business; or in ten seconds with a revolver, ef they meant fun." Scott got a verdict, from which York instantly appealed. It was said that he had sworn to spend his last dollar in the struggle.

In this way Sandy Bar began to accept the enmity of the former partners as a lifelong feud, and the fact that they had ever been friends was forgotten. The few who expected to learn from the trial the origin of the quarrel were disappointed. Among the various conjectures, that which ascribed some occult feminine influence as the cause was naturally popular, in a camp given to dubious compliment of the sex. "My word for it, gentlemen," said Colonel Starbottle, who had been known in Sacramento as a Gentleman of the Old School, "there's some lovely creature at the bottom of this." The gallant Colonel then proceeded to illustrate his theory, by divers sprightly stories, such as Gentlemen of the Old School are in the habit of repeating, but which, from deference to the prejudices of gentlemen of a more recent school, I refrain from transcribing here. But it would appear that even the Colonel's theory was fallacious. The only woman who personally might have exercised any influence over the partners was the pretty daughter of "old man Folinsbee," of Poverty Flat, at whose hospitable house—which exhibited some comforts and refinements rare in that crude civilization—both York and Scott were frequent visitors. Yet into this charming retreat York strode one evening, a month after the quarrel, and, beholding Scott sitting there, turned to the fair

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

hostess with the abrupt query, "Do you love this man?" The young woman thus addressed returned that answer—at once spirited and evasive—which would occur to most of my fair readers in such an exigency. Without another word, York left the house. "Miss Jo" heaved the least possible sigh as the door closed on York's curls and square shoulders, and then, like a good girl, turned to her insulted guest. "But would you believe it, dear?" she afterward related to an intimate friend, "the other creature, after glowering at me for a moment, got upon its hind legs, took its hat, and left, too; and that's the last I've seen of either."

The same hard disregard of all other interests or feelings in the gratification of their blind rancour characterized all their actions. When York purchased the land below Scott's new claim, and obliged the latter, at a great expense, to make a long détour to carry a "tail-race" around it, Scott retaliated by building a dam that overflowed York's claim on the river. It was Scott who, in conjunction with Colonel Starbottle, first organized that active opposition to the Chinamen, which resulted in the driving off of York's Mongolian labourers; it was York who built the wagon-road and established the express which rendered Scott's mules and pack-trains obsolete; it was Scott who called into life the Vigilance Committee which expatriated York's friend, Jack Hamlin; it was York who created the *Sandy Bar Herald*, which characterized the act as "a lawless outrage," and Scott as a "Border Ruffian"; it was Scott, at the head of twenty masked men, who, one moonlight night, threw the offending "formes" into the yellow river, and scattered the types in the dusty road. These proceedings were received in the distant and more civilized outlying

THE ILIAD OF SANDY BAR

towns as vague indications of progress and vitality. I have before me a copy of the *Poverty Flat Pioneer*, for the week ending August 12, 1856, in which the editor, under the head of "County Improvements," says: "The new Presbyterian Church on C Street, at Sandy Bar, is completed. It stands upon the lot formerly occupied by the Magnolia Saloon, which was so mysteriously burnt last month. The temple, which now rises like a Phoenix from the ashes of the Magnolia, is virtually the free gift of H. J. York, Esq., of Sandy Bar, who purchased the lot and donated the lumber. Other buildings are going up in the vicinity, but the most noticeable is the 'Sunny South Saloon,' erected by Captain Mat. Scott, nearly opposite the church. Captain Scott has spared no expense in the furnishing of this saloon, which promises to be one of the most agreeable places of resort in old Tuolumne. He has recently imported two new, first-class billiard-tables, with cork cushions. Our old friend, 'Mountain Jimmy,' will dispense liquors at the bar. We refer our readers to the advertisement in another column. Visitors to Sandy Bar cannot do better than give 'Jimmy' a call." Among the local items occurred the following: "H. J. York, Esq., of Sandy Bar, has offered a reward of \$100 for the detection of the parties who hauled away the steps of the new Presbyterian Church, C Street, Sandy Bar, during divine service on Sabbath evening last. Captain Scott adds another hundred for the capture of the miscreants who broke the magnificent plate-glass windows of the new saloon on the following evening. There is some talk of reorganizing the old Vigilance Committee of Sandy Bar."

When, for many months of cloudless weather, the hard unwinking sun of Sandy Bar had regularly

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

gone down on the unpacified wrath of these men, there was some talk of mediation. In particular, the pastor of the church to which I have just referred—a sincere, fearless, but perhaps not fully enlightened man—seized gladly upon the occasion of York's liberality to attempt to reunite the former partners. He preached an earnest sermon on the abstract sinfulness of discord and rancour. But the excellent sermons of the Rev. Mr. Daws were directed to an ideal congregation that did not exist at Sandy Bar,—a congregation of beings of unmixed vices and virtues, of single impulses, and perfectly logical motives, of preternatural simplicity, of childlike faith, and grown-up responsibilities. As unfortunately the people who actually attended Mr. Daws' church were mainly very human, somewhat artful, more self-excusing than self-accusing, rather good-natured, and decidedly weak, they quietly shed that portion of the sermon which referred to themselves, and, accepting York and Scott—who were both in defiant attendance—as curious examples of those ideal beings above referred to, felt a certain satisfaction—which, I fear, was not altogether Christian-like—in their “raking-down.” If Mr. Daws expected York and Scott to shake hands after the sermon, he was disappointed. But he did not relax his purpose. With that quiet fearlessness and determination which had won for him the respect of men who were too apt to regard piety as synonymous with effeminacy, he attacked Scott in his own house. What he said has not been recorded, but it is to be feared that it was part of his sermon. When he had concluded, Scott looked at him, not unkindly, over the glasses of his bar, and said, less irreverently than the words might convey, “Young man, I rather like your style; but when you know York and me as

THE ILIAD OF SANDY BAR

well as you do God Almighty, it'll be time to talk."

And so the feud progressed ; and so, as in more illustrious examples, the private and personal enmity of two representative men led gradually to the evolution of some crude, half-expressed principle or belief. It was not long before it was made evident that those beliefs were identical with certain broad principles laid down by the founders of the American Constitution, as expounded by the statesman-like A. ; or were the fatal quicksands, on which the ship of state might be wrecked, warningly pointed out by the eloquent B. The practical result of all which was the nomination of York and Scott to represent the opposite factions of Sandy Bar in legislative councils.

For some weeks past, the voters of Sandy Bar and the adjacent camps had been called upon, in large type, to "RALLY!" In vain the great pines at the cross-roads—whose trunks were compelled to bear this and other legends—moaned and protested from their windy watch-towers. But one day, with fife and drum, and flaming transparency, a procession filed into the triangular grove at the head of the gulch. The meeting was called to order by Colonel Starbottle, who, having once enjoyed legislative functions, and being vaguely known as "war-horse," was considered to be a valuable partisan of York. He concluded an appeal for his friend, with an enunciation of principles, interspersed with one or two anecdotes so gratuitously coarse that the very pines might have been moved to pelt him with their cast-off cones, as he stood there. But he created a laugh, on which his candidate rode into popular notice ; and when York rose to speak, he was greeted with cheers. But, to the general astonishment, the new

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

speaker at once launched into bitter denunciation of his rival. He not only dwelt upon Scott's deeds and example, as known to Sandy Bar, but spoke of facts connected with his previous career, hitherto unknown to his auditors. To great precision of epithet and directness of statement, the speaker added the fascination of revelation and exposure. The crowd cheered, yelled, and were delighted, but when this astounding philippic was concluded, there was a unanimous call for "Scott!" Colonel Starbottle would have resisted this manifest impropriety, but in vain. Partly from a crude sense of justice, partly from a meaner craving for excitement, the assemblage was inflexible; and Scott was dragged, pushed, and pulled upon the platform.

As his frowzy head and unkempt beard appeared above the railing, it was evident that he was drunk. But it was also evident, before he opened his lips, that the orator of Sandy Bar—the one man who could touch their vagabond sympathies (perhaps because he was not above appealing to them)—stood before them. A consciousness of this power lent a certain dignity to his figure, and I am not sure but that his very physical condition impressed them as a kind of regal, unbending, and large condescension. Howbeit, when this unexpected Hector arose from this ditch, York's myrmidons trembled.

"There's naught, gentlemen," said Scott, leaning forward on the railing,—“there's naught as that man hez said as isn't true. I was run outer Cairo; I did belong to the Regulators; I did desert from the army; I did leave a wife in Kansas. But thar's one thing he didn't charge me with, and, maybe, he's forgotten. For three years, gentlemen, I was that man's pardner!—” Whether he intended to say more, I cannot tell; a burst of applause artistically

THE ILIAD OF SANDY BAR

rounded and enforced the climax, and virtually elected the speaker. That fall he went to Sacramento, York went abroad ; and for the first time in many years distance and a new atmosphere isolated the old antagonists.

* * * * *

With little of change in the green wood, grey rock, and yellow river, but with much shifting of human landmarks, and new faces in its habitations, three years passed over Sandy Bar. The two men, once so identified with its character, seemed to have been quite forgotten. "You will never return to Sandy Bar," said Miss Folinsbee, the "Lily of Poverty Flat," on meeting York in Paris, "for Sandy Bar is no more. They call it Riverside now ; and the new town is built higher up on the river bank. By the by, 'Jo' says that Scott has won his suit about the 'Amity Claim,' and that he lives in the old cabin, and is drunk half his time. O, I beg your pardon," added the lively lady, as a flush crossed York's sallow cheek ; "but, bless me, I really thought that old grudge was made up. I'm sure it ought to be."

It was three months after this conversation, and a pleasant summer evening, that the Poverty Flat coach drew up before the veranda of the Union Hotel at Sandy Bar. Among its passengers was one, apparently a stranger, in the local distinction of well-fitting clothes and closely-shaven face, who demanded a private room and retired early to rest. But before sunrise next morning he arose, and, drawing some clothes from his carpet-bag, proceeded to array himself in a pair of white duck trousers, a white duck overshirt, and straw hat. When his toilet was completed, he tied a red bandanna handkerchief in a loop and threw it loosely over his

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

shoulders. The transformation was complete. As he crept softly down the stairs and stepped into the road, no one would have detected in him the elegant stranger of the previous night, and but few have recognized the face and figure of Henry York, of Sandy Bar.

In the uncertain light of that early hour, and in the change that had come over the settlement, he had to pause for a moment to recall where he stood. The Sandy Bar of his recollection lay below him, nearer the river; the buildings around him were of later date and newer fashion. As he strode toward the river, he noticed here a school-house and there a church. A little farther on, "The Sunny South" came in view, transformed into a restaurant, its gilding and its paint rubbed off. He now knew where he was; and, running briskly down a declivity, crossed a ditch, and stood upon the lower boundary of the Amity Claim.

The grey mist was rising slowly from the river, clinging to the tree-tops and drifting up the mountain-side, until it was caught among these rocky altars, and held a sacrifice to the ascending sun. At his feet the earth, cruelly gashed and scarred by his forgotten engines, had, since the old days, put on a show of greenness here and there, and now smiled forgivingly up at him, as if things were not so bad after all. A few birds were bathing in the ditch with a pleasant suggestion of its being a new and special provision of nature, and a hare ran into an inverted sluice-box, as he approached, as if it were put there for that purpose.

He had not yet dared to look in a certain direction. But the sun was now high enough to paint the little eminence on which the cabin stood. In spite of his self-control, his heart beat faster as he

THE ILIAD OF SANDY BAR

raised his eyes toward it. Its window and door were closed, no smoke came from its *adobe* chimney, but it was else unchanged. When within a few yards of it, he picked up a broken shovel, and, shouldering it with a smile, strode toward the door and knocked. There was no sound from within. The smile died upon his lips as he nervously pushed the door open.

A figure started up angrily and came toward him,—a figure whose bloodshot eyes suddenly fixed into a vacant stare, whose arms were at first outstretched and then thrown up in warning gesticulation,—a figure that suddenly gasped, choked, and then fell forward in a fit.

But before he touched the ground, York had him out into the open air and sunshine. In the struggle, both fell and rolled over on the ground. But the next moment York was sitting up, holding the convulsed frame of his former partner on his knee, and wiping the foam from his inarticulate lips. Gradually the tremor became less frequent, and then ceased; and the strong man lay unconscious in his arms.

For some moments York held him quietly thus, looking in his face. Afar, the stroke of a woodman's axe—a mere phantom of sound—was all that broke the stillness. High up the mountain, a wheeling hawk hung breathlessly above them. And then came voices, and two men joined them.

"A fight?" No, a fit; and would they help him bring the sick man to the hotel?

And there, for a week, the stricken partner lay, unconscious of aught but the visions wrought by disease and fear. On the eighth day, at sunrise, he rallied, and, opening his eyes, looked upon York, and pressed his hand; then he spoke:—

"And it's you. I thought it was only whisky."

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

York replied by only taking both of his hands, boyishly working them backward and forward, as his elbow rested on the bed, with a pleasant smile.

"And you've been abroad. How did you like Paris?"

"So, so. How did *you* like Sacramento?"

"Bully."

And that was all they could think to say. Presently Scott opened his eyes again.

"I'm mighty weak."

"You'll get better soon."

"Not much."

A long silence followed, in which they could hear the sounds of wood-chopping, and that Sandy Bar was already astir for the coming day. Then Scott slowly and with difficulty turned his face to York, and said,—

"I might hev killed you once."

"I wish you had."

They pressed each other's hands again, but Scott's grasp was evidently failing. He seemed to summon his energies for a special effort.

"Old man!"

"Old chap."

"Closer!"

York bent his head toward the slowly fading face.

"Do ye mind that morning?"

"Yes."

A gleam of fun slid into the corner of Scott's blue eye, as he whispered,—

"Old man, thar *was* too much saleratus in that bread."

It is said these were his last words. For when the sun, which had so often gone down upon the idle wrath of these foolish men, looked again upon

THE ILIAD OF SANDY BAR

them reunited, it saw the hand of Scott fall cold and irresponsible from the yearning clasp of his former partner, and it knew that the feud of Sandy Bar was at an end.

A MONTE FLAT PASTORAL: HOW OLD MAN PLUNKETT WENT HOME

I THINK we all loved him. Even after he mismanaged the affairs of the Amity Ditch Company, we commiserated him, although most of us were stockholders and lost heavily. I remember that the blacksmith went so far as to say that "them chaps as put that responsibility on the old man oughter be lynched." But the blacksmith was not a stockholder, and the expression was looked upon as the excusable extravagance of a large, sympathizing nature, that, when combined with a powerful frame, was unworthy of notice. At least, that was the way they put it. Yet I think there was a general feeling of regret that this misfortune would interfere with the old man's long-cherished plan of "going home."

Indeed, for the last ten years he had been "going home." He was going home after a six months' sojourn at Monte Flat. He was going home after the first rains. He was going home when the rains were over. He was going home when he had cut the timber on Buckeye Hill, when there was pasture on Dow's Flat, when he struck pay-dirt on Eureka Hill, when the Amity Company paid its first dividend, when the election was over, when he had received an answer from his wife. And so the years rolled by, the spring rains came and went, the woods of Buckeye Hill were level with the ground, the pasture on Dow's Flat grew sere and dry, Eureka Hill yielded its pay-dirt and swamped its owner, the first dividends of the Amity Company were made from the assessments of stockholders, there were new county officers at Monte Flat, his wife's answer had changed into a persistent question, and still old man Plunkett remained.

A MONTE FLAT PASTORAL

It is only fair to say that he had made several distinct essays towards going. Five years before he had bidden good-bye to Monte Hill with much effusion and hand-shaking. But he never got any further than the next town. Here he was induced to trade the sorrel colt he was riding for a bay mare—a transaction that at once opened to his lively fancy a vista of vast and successful future speculation. A few days after Abner Dean of Angel's received a letter from him stating that he was going to Visalia to buy horses. "I am satisfied," wrote Plunkett, with that elevated rhetoric for which his correspondence was remarkable, "I am satisfied that we are at last developing the real resources of California. The world will yet look to Dow's Flat as the great stock-raising centre. In view of the interests involved, I have deferred my departure for a month." It was two before he again returned to us, penniless. Six months later he was again enabled to start for the Eastern States, and this time he got as far as San Francisco. I have before me a letter which I received a few days after his arrival, from which I venture to give an extract: "You know, my dear boy, that I have always believed that gambling, as it is absurdly called, is still in its infancy in California. I have always maintained that a perfect system might be invented by which the game of poker may be made to yield a certain percentage to the intelligent player. I am not at liberty at present to disclose the system, but before leaving the city I intend to perfect it."

He seems to have done so, and returned to Monte Flat with two dollars and thirty-seven cents, the absolute remainder of his capital after such perfection.

It was not until 1868 that he appeared to have

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

finally succeeded in going home. He left us by the overland route—a route which he declared would give great opportunity for the discovery of undeveloped resources. His last letter was dated Virginia City. He was absent three years. At the close of a very hot day in midsummer he alighted from the Wingdam stage with hair and beard powdered with dust and age. There was a certain shyness about his greeting, quite different from his frank volubility, that did not, however, impress us as any accession of character. For some days he was reserved regarding his recent visit, contenting himself with asserting, with more or less aggressiveness, that he had “always said he was going home, and now he had been there.” Later he grew more communicative, and spoke freely and critically of the manners and customs of New York and Boston, commented on the social changes in the years of his absence, and, I remember, was very hard upon what he deemed the follies incidental to a high state of civilization. Still later he darkly alluded to the moral laxity of the higher planes of Eastern society, but it was not long before he completely tore away the veil and revealed the naked wickedness of New York social life in a way I even now shudder to recall. Vinous intoxication, it appeared, was a common habit of the first ladies of the city; immoralities which he scarcely dared name were daily practised by the refined of both sexes; niggardliness and greed were the common vices of the rich. “I have always asserted,” he continued, “that corruption must exist where luxury and riches are rampant, and capital is not used to develop the natural resources of the country. Thank you—I will take mine without sugar.” It is possible that some of these painful details crept into the local

A MONTE FLAT PASTORAL

journals. I remember an editorial in the *Monte Flat Monitor*, entitled "The Effete East," in which the fatal decadence of New York and New England was elaborately stated, and California offered as a means of natural salvation. "Perhaps," said the *Monitor*, "we might add that Calaveras county offers superior inducements to the Eastern visitor with capital."

Later he spoke of his family. The daughter he had left a child had grown into beautiful womanhood; the son was already taller and larger than his father, and in a playful trial of strength, "the young rascal," added Plunkett, with a voice broken with paternal pride and humorous objurgation, had twice thrown his doting parent to the ground. But it was of his daughter that he chiefly spoke. Perhaps emboldened by the evident interest which masculine Monte Flat held in feminine beauty, he expatiated at some length on her various charms and accomplishments, and finally produced her photograph—that of a very pretty girl—to their infinite peril. But his account of his first meeting with her was so peculiar that I must fain give it after his own methods, which were, perhaps, some shades less precise and elegant than his written style.

"You see, boys, it's always been my opinion that a man oughter be able to tell his own flesh and blood by instinct. It's ten years since I'd seen my Melindy, and she was then only seven and about so high. So when I went to New York, what did I do? Did I go straight to my house and ask for my wife and daughter, like other folks? No, sir! I rigged myself up as a peddler, as a peddler, sir, and I rung the bell. When the servant came to the door, I wanted—don't you see—to show the ladies some trinkets. Then there was a voice over the banister, says,

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

Don't want anything—send him away.' 'Some nice laces, ma'am, smuggled,' I says, looking up. 'Get out, you wretch,' says she. I knew the voice, boys, it was my wife; sure as a gun—thar wasn't any instinct thar. 'May be the young ladies want somethin',' I said. 'Did you hear me!' says she, and with that she jumps forward and I left. It's ten years, boys, since I've seen the old woman, but somehow, when she fetched that leap, I naterally left."

He had been standing beside the bar—his usual attitude—when he made this speech, but at this point he half-faced his auditors with a look that was very effective. Indeed, a few who had exhibited some signs of scepticism and lack of interest at once assumed an appearance of intense gratification and curiosity as he went on :

"Well, by hangin' round there for a day or two, I found out at last it was to be Melindy's birthday next week, and that she was goin' to have a big party. I tell ye what, boys, it weren't no slouch of a reception. The whole house was bloomin' with flowers, and blazin' with lights, and there was no end of servants and plate and refreshments and fixin's——"

"Uncle Joe."

"Well?"

"Where did they get the money?"

Plunkett faced his interlocutor with a severe glance. "I always said," he replied slowly, "that when I went home, I'd send on ahead of me a draft for ten thousand dollars. I always said that, didn't I? Eh? And I said I was goin' home—and I've been home—haven't I? Well?"

Either there was something irresistibly conclusive in this logic, or else the desire to hear the remainder of Plunkett's story was stronger; but there was no

A MONTE FLAT PASTORAL

more interruption. His ready good-humour quickly returned, and, with a slight chuckle, he went on :

“ I went to the biggest jewellery shop in town, and I bought a pair of diamond ear-rings and put them in my pocket, and went to the house. ‘ What name ? ’ says the chap who opened the door, and he looked like a cross ’twixt a restaurant waiter and a parson. ‘ Skeesicks,’ said I. He takes me in, and pretty soon my wife comes sailin’ into the parlour and says : ‘ Excuse me, but I don’t think I recognize the name.’ She was mighty polite, for I had on a red wig and side-whiskers. ‘ A friend of your husband’s from California, ma’am, with a present for your daughter, Miss ——’ and I made as I had forgot the name. But all of a sudden a voice said, ‘ That’s too thin,’ and in walked Melindy. ‘ It’s playin’ it rather low down, father, to pretend you don’t know your daughter’s name—ain’t it now ? How are you, old man ? ’ And with that she tears off my wig and whiskers, and throws her arms around my neck,—instinct, sir, pure instinct ! ”

Emboldened by the laughter which followed his description of the filial utterances of Melinda, he again repeated her speech, with more or less elaboration, joining in with, and indeed often leading, the hilarity that accompanied it, and returning to it with more or less incoherency, several times during the evening.

And so at various times, and at various places,—but chiefly in bar-rooms—did this Ulysses of Monte Flat recount the story of his wanderings. There were several discrepancies in his statement, there was sometimes considerable prolixity of detail, there was occasional change of character and scenery, there was once or twice an absolute change in the *dénouement*, but always the fact of his having

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

visited his wife and children remained. Of course in a sceptical community like that of Monte Flat, a community accustomed to great expectation and small realization, a community wherein, to use the local dialect, "they got the colour and struck hardpan," more frequently than any other mining camp—in such a community the fullest credence was not given to old man Plunkett's facts. There was only one exception to the general unbelief—Henry York, of Sandy Bar. It was he who was always an attentive listener; it was his scant purse that had often furnished Plunkett with means to pursue his unprofitable speculations; it was to him that the charms of Melinda were more frequently rehearsed; it was he that had borrowed her photograph—and it was he that, sitting alone in his little cabin one night, kissed that photograph until his honest, handsome face glowed again in the firelight.

It was dusty in Monte Flat. The ruins of the long, dry season were crumbling everywhere; everywhere the dying summer had strewn its red ashes a foot deep, or exhaled its last breath in a red cloud above the troubled highways. The alders and cottonwoods that marked the line of the water-courses were grimy with dust, and looked as if they might have taken root in the open air; the gleaming stones of the parched water-courses themselves were as dry bones in the valley of death. The dusty sunset at times painted the flanks of the distant hills a dull coppery hue; on other days there was an odd, indefinable earthquake halo on the volcanic cones of the furthest coast spurs; again an acrid resinous smoke from the burning wood on Heavytree Hill, smarted the eyes and choked the free breath of Monte Flat, or a fierce wind, driving everything—including the shrivelled summer like a curled leaf

180

A MONTE FLAT PASTORAL

—before it, swept down the flanks of the Sierras and chased the inhabitants to the doors of their cabins, and shook its red fist in at their windows. And on such a night as this—the dust having, in some way, choked the wheels of material progress in Monte Flat—most of the inhabitants were gathered listlessly in the gilded bar-room of the Moquelumne Hotel, spitting silently at the red-hot stove that tempered the mountain winds to the shorn lambs of Monte Flat, and waiting for the rain.

Every method known to the Flat of beguiling the time until the advent of this long-looked-for phenomenon had been tried. It is true the methods were not many—being limited chiefly to that form of popular facetiæ known as practical joking; and even this had assumed the seriousness of a business pursuit. Tommy Roy, who had spent two hours in digging a ditch in front of his own door—into which a few friends casually dropped during the evening—looked *ennuyé* and dissatisfied; the four prominent citizens, who, disguised as footpads, had stopped the County Treasurer on the Wingdam road, were jaded from their playful efforts next morning; the principal physician and lawyer of Monte Flat, who had entered into an unhallowed conspiracy to compel the Sheriff of Calaveras and his *posse* to serve a writ of ejectment on a grizzly bear, feebly disguised under the name of “one Major Ursus,” who haunted the groves of Heavytree Hill, wore an expression of resigned weariness. Even the editor of the *Monte Flat Monitor*, who had that morning written a glowing account of a battle with the Wipneck Indians for the benefit of Eastern readers—even *he* looked grave and worn. When, at last, Abner Dean of Angel’s, who had been on a visit to San Francisco, walked into the room, he was, of course, victimized

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

in the usual way by one or two apparently honest questions which ended in his answering them, and then falling into the trap of asking another to his utter and complete shame and mortification—but that was all. Nobody laughed, and Abner, although a victim, did not lose his good-humour. He turned quietly on his tormentors and said—

“I’ve got something better than that—you know old man Plunkett?” Everybody simultaneously spat at the stove and nodded his head.

“You know he went home three years ago?” Two or three changed the position of their legs from the backs of different chairs, and one man said “Yes.”

“Had a good time home?”

Everybody looked cautiously at the man who had said “Yes,” and he, accepting the responsibility with a faint-hearted smile, said “Yes,” again, and breathed hard. “Saw his wife and child—purty girl?” said Abner, cautiously. “Yes,” answered the man, doggedly. “Saw her photograph, perhaps?” continued Abner Dean quietly.

The man looked hopelessly around for support. Two or three who had been sitting near him, and evidently encouraging him with a look of interest, now shamelessly abandoned him and looked another way. Henry York flushed a little and veiled his brown eyes. The man hesitated, and then with a sickly smile that was intended to convey the fact that he was perfectly aware of the object of this questioning, and was only humouring it from abstract good feeling, returned “Yes,” again.

“Sent home—let’s see,—ten thousand dollars, wasn’t it?” Abner Dean went on. “Yes,” reiterated the man, with the same smile.

“Well, I thought so,” said Abner quietly, “but

182

A MONTE FLAT PASTORAL

the fact is, you see, that he never went home at all—nary time.”

Everybody stared at Abner in genuine surprise and interest, as with provoking calmness and a half-lazy manner he went on:

“You see thar was a man down in 'Frisco as knowed him and saw him in Sonora during the whole of that three years. He was herding sheep or tending cattle, or spekilating all that time, and hadn't a red cent. Well, it 'mounts to this—that 'ar Plunkett ain't been east of the Rocky Mountains since '49.”

The laugh which Abner Dean had the right to confidently expect came, but it was bitter and sardonic. I think indignation was apparent in the minds of his hearers. It was felt, for the first time, that there was a limit to practical joking. A deception carried on for a year, compromising the sagacity of Monte Flat, was deserving the severest reprobation. Of course nobody had believed Plunkett—but then the supposition that it might be believed in adjacent camps that they *had* believed him was gall and bitterness. The lawyer thought that an indictment for obtaining money under false pretences might be found, the physician had long suspected him of insanity, and was not certain but that he ought to be confined. The four prominent merchants thought that the business interests of Monte Flat demanded that something should be done. In the midst of an excited and angry discussion the door slowly opened, and old man Plunkett staggered into the room.

He had changed pitifully in the last six months. His hair was a dusty yellowish-grey, like the chimisal on the flanks of Heavytree Hill; his face was waxen white and blue and puffy under the eyes;

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

his clothes were soiled and shabby—streaked in front with the stains of hurried luncheons eaten standing, and fluffy behind with the wool and hair of hurriedly extemporized couches. In obedience to that odd law that the more seedy and soiled a man's garments become the less does he seem inclined to part with them, even during that portion of the twenty-four hours when they are deemed least essential, Plunkett's clothes had gradually taken on the appearance of a kind of bark, or an outgrowth from within, for which their possessor was not entirely responsible. Howbeit, as he entered the room he attempted to button his coat over a dirty shirt, and passed his fingers, after the manner of some animal, over his cracker-strewn beard—in recognition of a cleanly public sentiment. But even as he did so the weak smile faded from his lips, and his hand, after fumbling aimlessly around a button, dropped helplessly at his side. For, as he leaned his back against the bar and faced the group, he for the first time became aware that every eye but one was fixed upon him. His quick nervous apprehension at once leaped to the truth. His miserable secret was out and abroad in the very air about him. As a last resort he glanced despairingly at Henry York, but his flushed face was turned toward the windows.

No word was spoken. As the bar-keeper silently swung a decanter and glass before him, he took a cracker from a dish and mumbled it with affected unconcern. He lingered over his liquor until its potency stiffened his relaxed sinews, and dulled the nervous edge of his apprehension, and then he suddenly faced around. "It don't look as if we were goin' to hev any rain much afore Christmas," he said with defiant ease. No one made any reply.

A MONTE FLAT PASTORAL

"Just like this in '52, and again in '60. It's always been my opinion that these dry seasons come reg'lar. I've said it afore. I say it again. It's jist as I said about going home, you know," he added, with desperate recklessness.

"Thar's a man," said Abner Dean, lazily, "ez sez you never went home. Thar's a man ez sez you've been three years in Sonora. Thar's a man er sez you hain't seen your wife and daughter since '49. Thar's a man ez sez you've been playin' this camp for six months."

There was a dead silence. Then a voice said, quite as quietly, "That man lies."

It was not the old man's voice. Everybody turned as Henry York slowly rose, stretching out his six feet of length, and, brushing away the ashes that had fallen from his pipe upon his breast, deliberately placed himself beside Plunkett, and faced the others.

"That man ain't here," continued Abner Dean, with listless indifference of voice and a gentle pre-occupation of manner, as he carelessly allowed his right hand to rest on his hip near his revolver. "That man ain't here, but if I'm called upon to make good what he says, why, I'm on hand."

All rose as the two men—perhaps the least externally agitated of them all—approached each other. The lawyer stepped in between them.

"Perhaps there's some mistake here. York, do you *know* that the old man has been home?"

"Yes."

"How do you know it?"

York turned his clear, honest, frank eyes on his questioner, and without a tremor told the only direct and unmitigated lie of his life. "Because I've seen him there."

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

The answer was conclusive. It was known that York had been visiting the East during the old man's absence. The colloquy had diverted attention from Plunkett, who, pale and breathless, was staring at his unexpected deliverer. As he turned again toward his tormentors there was something in the expression of his eye that caused those that were nearest to him to fall back, and sent a strange, indefinable thrill through the boldest and most reckless. As he made a step forward the physician almost unconsciously raised his hand with a warning gesture, and old man Plunkett, with his eyes fixed upon the red-hot stove, and an odd smile playing about his mouth, began :

"Yes—of course you did. Who says you didn't? It ain't no lie; I said I was goin' home, and I've been home. Haven't I? My God! I have. Who says I've been lyin'? Who says I'm dreamin'? Is it true—why don't you speak? It is true, after all. You say you saw me there, why don't you speak again? Say! say!—is it true? It's going now, O my God—it's going again. It's going now. Save me!" and with a fierce cry, he fell forward in a fit upon the floor.

When the old man regained his senses he found himself in York's cabin. A flickering fire of pine boughs lit up the rude rafters and fell upon a photograph tastefully framed with fir cones, and hung above the brush whereon he lay. It was the portrait of a young girl. It was the first object to meet the old man's gaze, and it brought with it a flush of such painful consciousness, that he started and glanced quickly around. But his eyes only encountered those of York—clear, grey, critical, and patient, and they fell again.

"Tell me, old man," said York, not unkindly, but

A MONTE FLAT PASTORAL

with the same cold, clear tone in his voice that his eye betrayed a moment ago, "tell me, is *that* a lie too?" and he pointed to the picture.

The old man closed his eyes and did not reply. Two hours before, the question would have stung him into some evasion or bravado. But the revelation contained in the question, as well as the tone of York's voice was to him now, in his pitiable condition, a relief. It was plain, even to his confused brain, that York had lied when he had endorsed his story in the bar-room—it was clear to him now that he had not been home—that he was not, as he had begun to fear, going mad. It was such a relief that, with characteristic weakness, his former recklessness and extravagance returned. He began to chuckle—finally to laugh uproariously.

York, with his eyes still fixed on the old man, withdrew the hand with which he had taken his.

"Didn't we fool 'em nicely, eh, Yorkey! He! he! The biggest thing yet ever played in this camp! I always said I'd play 'em all some day, and I have—played 'em for six months. Ain't it rich—ain't it the richest thing you ever seed? Did you see Abner's face when he spoke 'bout that man as seed me in Sonora?—warn't it good as the minstrels? O it's too much!" and striking his leg with the palm of his hand he almost threw himself from the bed in a paroxysm of laughter—a paroxysm that nevertheless appeared to be half real and half affected.

"Is that photograph hers?" said York, in a low voice, after a slight pause.

"Hers? No! It's one of the San Francisco actresses, he! he! Don't you see?—I bought it for two bits in one of the bookstores. I never thought they'd swaller *that* too! but they did! Oh, but the

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

old man played 'em this time, didn't he—eh?" and he peered curiously in York's face.

"Yes, and he played *me* too," said York, looking steadily in the old man's eye.

"Yes, of course," interposed Plunkett, hastily, "but you know, Yorkey, you got out of it well! You've sold 'em too. We've both got 'em on a string now,—you and me,—got to stick together now. You did it well, Yorkey, you did it well. Why, when you said you'd seen me in York City, I'm d—d if I didn't——"

"Didn't what?" said York, gently, for the old man had stopped with a pale face and wandering eye.

"Eh?"

"You say when I said I had seen you in New York you thought——"

"You lie!" said the old man, fiercely, "I didn't say I thought anything. What are you trying to go back on me for? Eh?" His hands were trembling as he rose muttering from the bed and made his way toward the hearth.

"Gimme some whisky," he said, presently, "and dry up. You oughter treat anyway. Them fellers oughter treated last night. By hookey I'd made 'em—only I fell sick."

York placed the liquor and a tin cup on the table beside him, and going to the door, turned his back upon his guest, and looked out on the night. Although it was clear moonlight, the familiar prospect never to him seemed so dreary. The dead waste of the broad Wingdam highway never seemed so monotonous—so like the days that he had passed and were to come back to him—so like the old man in its suggestions of going sometime and never getting there. He turned, and going up to Plunkett, put his hand upon his shoulder and said:

A MONTE FLAT PASTORAL

"I want you to answer one question fairly and squarely?"

The liquor seemed to have warmed the torpid blood in the old man's veins and softened his acerbity, for the face he turned up to York was mellowed in its rugged outline and more thoughtful in expression, as he said:

"Go on, my boy."

"Have you a wife and—daughter?"

"Before God I have!"

The two men were silent for a moment; both gazing at the fire. Then Plunkett began rubbing his knees slowly.

"The wife, if it comes to that, ain't much," he began, cautiously, "being a little on the shoulder, you know, and wantin', so to speak, a liberal California education—which makes, you know, a bad combination. It's always been my opinion that there ain't any worse. Why, she's as ready with her tongue as Abner Dean is with his revolver, only with the difference that she shoots from principle, as she calls it, and the consequence is, she's always layin' for you. It's the effete East, my boy, that's ruinin' her—it's them ideas she gets in New York and Boston that's made her and me what we are. I don't mind her havin' 'em if she didn't shoot. But havin' that propensity, them principles oughtn't to be lying round loose no more'n firearms."

"But your daughter?" said York.

The old man's hands went up to his eyes here, and then both hands and head dropped forward on the table. "Don't say anything 'bout her, my boy, don't ask me now——" With one hand concealing his eyes, he fumbled about with the other in his pockets for his handkerchief—but vainly. Perhaps it was owing to this fact that he repressed his tears,

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

for when he removed his hand from his eyes they were quite dry. Then he found his voice.

"She's a beautiful girl, beautiful—though I say it, and you shall see her, my boy, you shall see her, sure. I've got things about fixed now. I shall have my plan for reducin' ores perfected in a day or two, and I've got proposals from all the smeltin' works here," here he hastily produced a bundle of papers that fell upon the floor, "and I'm goin' to send for 'em. I've got the papers here as will give me ten thousand dollars clear in the next month," he added, as he strove to collect the valuable documents again. "I'll have 'em here by Christmas, if I live, and you shall eat your Christmas dinner with me, York, my boy,—you shall, sure."

With his tongue now fairly loosened by liquor and the suggestive vastness of his prospects, he rambled on more or less incoherently, elaborating and amplifying his plans—occasionally even speaking of them as already accomplished, until the moon rode high in the heavens, and York led him again to his couch. Here he lay for some time muttering to himself, until at last he sank into a heavy sleep. When York had satisfied himself of the fact, he gently took down the picture and frame, and, going to the hearth, tossed them on the dying embers, and sat down to see them burn.

The fir cones leaped instantly into flame ; then the features that had entranced San Francisco audiences nightly, flashed up and passed away—as such things are apt to pass—and even the cynical smile on York's lips faded too. And then there came a supplemental and unexpected flash as the embers fell together, and by its light York saw a paper upon the floor. It was one that had fallen from the old man's pocket. As he picked it up listlessly, a photograph

190

A MONTE FLAT PASTORAL

slipped from its folds. It was the portrait of a young girl, and on its reverse was written, in a scrawling hand, "Melinda to Father."

It was at best a cheap picture ; but, ah me ! I fear even the deft graciousness of the highest art could not have softened the rigid angularities of that youthful figure, its self-complacent vulgarity, its cheap finery, its expressionless ill-favour. York did not look at it a second time. He turned to the letter for relief.

It was misspelled, it was unpunctuated, it was almost illegible, it was fretful in tone, and selfish in sentiment. It was not, I fear, even original in the story of its woes. It was the harsh recital of poverty, of suspicion, of mean make-shifts and compromises, of low pains and of lower longings, of sorrows that were degrading, of a grief that was pitiable. Yet it was sincere in a certain kind of vague yearning for the presence of the degraded man to whom it was written—an affection that was more like a confused instinct than a sentiment.

York folded it again carefully and placed it beneath the old man's pillow. Then he returned to his seat by the fire. A smile that had been playing upon his face, deepening the curves behind his moustache, and gradually overrunning his clear brown eyes, presently faded away. It was last to go from his eyes, and it left there—oddly enough to those who did not know him—a tear.

He sat there for a long time, leaning forward, his head upon his hands. The wind that had been striving with the canvas roof all at once lifted its edges, and a moonbeam slipped suddenly in, and lay for a moment like a shining blade on his shoulder. And knighted by its touch, straightway plain Henry York arose,—sustained, high-purposed, and self-reliant !

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

The rains had come at last. There was already a visible greenness on the slopes of Heavytree Hill, and the long, white track of the Wingdam road was lost in outlying pools and ponds a hundred rods from Monte Flat. The spent water-courses, whose white bones had been sinuously trailed over the flat, like the vertebræ of some forgotten saurian, were full again: the dry bones moved once more in the valley, and there was joy in the ditches, and a pardonable extravagance in the columns of the *Monte Flat Monitor*. "Never before in the history of our country had the yield been so satisfactory. Our contemporary of the *Hillside Beacon*, who yesterday facetiously alluded to the fact (?) that our best citizens were leaving town, in 'dug-outs,' on account of the flood, will be glad to hear that our distinguished fellow-townsmen, Mr. Henry York, now on a visit to his relatives in the East, lately took with him, in his 'dug-out,' the modest sum of fifty thousand dollars, the result of one week's clean-up. We can imagine," continued that sprightly journal, "that no such misfortune is likely to overtake Hillside this season. And yet we believe the *Beacon* man wants a railroad." A few journals broke out into poetry. The operator at Simpson's Crossing telegraphed to the *Sacramento Universe*: "All day the low clouds have shook their garnered fullness down." A San Francisco journal lapsed into noble verse, thinly disguised as editorial prose: "Rejoice, the gentle rain has come, the bright and pearly rain, which scatters blessings on the hills, and sifts them o'er the plain. Rejoice, etc." Indeed, there was only one to whom the rain had not brought blessing, and that was Plunkett. In some mysterious and darksome way it had interfered with the perfection of his new method of reducing ores, and thrown the advent of that invention back another

192

A MONTE FLAT PASTORAL

season. It had brought him down to an habitual seat in the bar-room, where, to heedless and inattentive ears he sat and discoursed of the East and his family.

No one disturbed him. Indeed, it was rumoured that some funds had been lodged with the landlord, by a person or persons unknown, whereby his few wants were provided for. His mania—for that was the charitable construction which Monte Flat put upon his conduct—was indulged, even to the extent of Monte Flat's accepting his invitation to dine with his family on Christmas Day—an invitation extended frankly to every one with whom the old man drank or talked. But one day, to everybody's astonishment, he burst into the bar-room, holding an open letter in his hand. It read as follows:—

“Be ready to meet your family at the new cottage on Heavytree Hill on Christmas Day. Invite what friends you choose.

“HENRY YORK.”

The letter was handed round in silence. The old man, with a look alternating between hope and fear, gazed in the faces of the group. The doctor looked up significantly, after a pause. “It's a forgery, evidently,” he said, in a low voice; “he's cunning enough to conceive it—they always are—but you'll find he'll fail in executing it. Watch his face! Old man,” he said suddenly, in a loud, peremptory tone, “this is a trick—a forgery—and you know it. Answer me squarely, and look me in the eye. Isn't it so?”

The eyes of Plunkett stared a moment, and then dropped weakly. Then, with a feebler smile, he said, “You're too many for me, boys. The Doc's right. The little game's up. You can take the old man's hat”; and so, tottering, trembling, and chuckling, he dropped into silence and his accustomed seat. But

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

the next day he seemed to have forgotten this episode, and talked as glibly as ever of the approaching festivity.

And so the days and weeks passed until Christmas—a bright, clear day, warmed with south winds, and joyous with the resurrection of springing grasses—broke upon Monte Flat. And then there was a sudden commotion in the hotel bar-room, and Abner Dean stood beside the old man's chair, and shook him out of a slumber to his feet. "Rouse up, old man; York is here, with your wife and daughter at the cottage on Heavytree. Come, old man. Here, boys, give him a lift"; and in another moment a dozen strong and willing hands had raised the old man, and bore him in triumph to the street, up the steep grade of Heavytree Hill, and deposited him, struggling and confused, in the porch of a little cottage. At the same instant, two women rushed forward, but were restrained by a gesture from Henry York. The old man was struggling to his feet. With an effort, at last, he stood erect, trembling, his eye fixed, a grey pallor on his cheek, and a deep resonance in his voice.

"It's all a trick and a lie! They ain't no flesh and blood or kin o' mine. It ain't my wife, nor child. My daughter's a beautiful girl—a beautiful girl—d'ye hear? She's in New York, with her mother, and I'm going to fetch her here. I said I'd go home, and I've been home—d'ye hear me?—I've been home! It's a mean trick you're playin' on the old man. Let me go d'ye hear? Keep them women off me! Let me go! I'm going—I'm going home!"

His hands were thrown convulsively in the air, and, half turning round, he fell sideways on the porch, and so to the ground. They picked him up hurriedly; but too late. He had gone home.

MR. THOMPSON'S PRODIGAL

WE all knew that Mr. Thompson was looking for his son, and a pretty bad one at that. That he was coming to California for this sole object was no secret to his fellow-passengers ; and the physical peculiarities, as well as the moral weaknesses, of the missing prodigal were made equally plain to us through the frank volubility of the parent. "You was speaking of a young man which was hung at Red Dog for sluice-robbing," said Mr. Thompson to a steerage passenger, one day ; "be you aware of the colour of his eyes ?" "Black," responded the passenger. "Ah," said Mr. Thompson, referring to some mental memoranda, "Char-les's eyes was blue." He then walked away. Perhaps it was from this unsympathetic mode of inquiry, perhaps it was from that Western predilection to take a humorous view of any principle or sentiment persistently brought before them, that Mr. Thompson's quest was the subject of some satire among the passengers. A gratuitous advertisement of the missing Charles, addressed to "Jailers and Guardians," circulated privately among them ; everybody remembered to have met Charles under distressing circumstances. Yet it is but due to my countrymen to state that when it was known that Thompson had embarked some wealth in this visionary project, but little of this satire found its way to his ears, and nothing was uttered in his hearing that might bring a pang to a father's heart, or imperil a possible pecuniary advantage of the satirist. Indeed, Mr. Bracy Tibbets' jocular proposition to form a joint-stock company to "prospect" for the missing youth received at one time quite serious entertainment.

Perhaps to superficial criticism Mr. Thompson's

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

nature was not picturesque nor lovable. His history, as imparted at dinner, one day, by himself, was practical even in its singularity. After a hard and wilful youth and maturity,—in which he had buried a broken-spirited wife, and driven his son to sea,—he suddenly experienced religion. “I got it in New Orleans in ’59,” said Mr. Thompson, with the general suggestion of referring to an epidemic. “Enter ye the narrer gate. Parse me the beans.” Perhaps this practical quality upheld him in his apparently hopeless search. He had no clue to the whereabouts of his runaway son; indeed, scarcely a proof of his present existence. From his indifferent recollection of the boy of twelve, he now expected to identify the man of twenty-five.

It would seem that he was successful. How he succeeded was one of the few things he did not tell. There are, I believe, two versions of the story. One, that Mr. Thompson, visiting a hospital, discovered his son by reason of a peculiar hymn, chanted by the sufferer, in a delirious dream of his boyhood. This version, giving as it did, wide range to the finer feelings of the heart, was quite popular; and as told by the Rev. Mr. Gushington, on his return from his California tour, never failed to satisfy an audience. The other was less simple, and, as I shall adopt it here, deserves more elaboration.

It was after Mr. Thompson had given up searching for his son among the living, and had taken to the examination of cemeteries, and a careful inspection of the “cold *hic jacets* of the dead.” At this time he was a frequent visitor of “Lone Mountain,”—a dreary hill-top, bleak enough in its original isolation, and bleaker for the white-faced marbles by which San Francisco anchored her departed citizens, and kept them down in a shifting sand

MR. THOMPSON'S PRODIGAL

that refused to cover them, and against a fierce and persistent wind that strove to blow them utterly away. Against this wind the old man opposed a will quite as persistent,—a grizzled, hard face, and a tall, crape-bound hat drawn tightly over his eyes,—and so spent days in reading the mortuary inscriptions audibly to himself. The frequency of Scriptural quotation pleased him, and he was fond of corroborating them by a pocket Bible. “That’s from Psalms,” he said one day, to an adjacent grave-digger. The man made no reply. Not at all rebuffed, Mr. Thompson at once slid down into the open grave, with a more practical inquiry, “Did you ever, in your profession, come across Charles Thompson?” “Thompson be d—d!” said the grave-digger, with great directness. “Which, if he hadn’t religion, I think he is,” responded the old man, as he clambered out of the grave.

It was, perhaps, on this occasion that Mr. Thompson stayed later than usual. As he turned his face toward the city, lights were beginning to twinkle ahead, and a fierce wind, made visible by fog, drove him forward, or, lying in wait, charged him angrily from the corners of deserted suburban streets. It was on one of these corners that something else, quite as indistinct and malevolent, leaped upon him with an oath, a presented pistol, and a demand for money. But it was met by a will of iron and a grip of steel. The assailant and assailed rolled together on the ground. But the next moment the old man was erect; one hand grasping the captured pistol, the other clutching at arm’s length the throat of a figure, surly, youthful, and savage.

“Young man,” said Mr. Thompson, setting his thin lips together, “what might be your name?”

“Thompson!”

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

The old man's hand slid from the throat to the arm of his prisoner, without relaxing its firmness.

"Charles Thompson, come with me," he said, presently, and marched his captive to the hotel. What took place there has not transpired, but it was known the next morning that Mr. Thompson had found his son.

It is proper to add to the above improbable story that there was nothing in the young man's appearance or manners to justify it. Grave, reticent, and handsome, devoted to his newly-found parent, he assumed the emoluments and responsibilities of his new condition with a certain serious ease that more nearly approached that which San Francisco society lacked, and—rejected. Some chose to despise this quality as a tendency to "psalm singing"; others saw in it the inherited qualities of the parent, and were ready to prophesy for the son the same hard old age. But all agreed that it was not inconsistent with the habits of money-getting, for which father and son were respected.

And yet, the old man did not seem to be happy. Perhaps it was that the consummation of his wishes left him without a practical mission; perhaps—and it is the more probable—he had little love for the son he had regained. The obedience he exacted was freely given; the reform he had set his heart upon was complete; and yet, somehow, it did not seem to please him. In reclaiming his son, he had fulfilled all the requirements that his religious duty required of him, and yet the act seemed to lack sanctification. In this perplexity, he read again the parable of the Prodigal Son,—which he had long ago adopted for his guidance,—and found that he had omitted the final feast of reconciliation. This seemed to offer the proper quality of ceremoniousness in

198

MR. THOMPSON'S PRODIGAL

the sacrament between himself and his son; and so, a year after the appearance of Charles, he set about giving him a party. "Invite everybody, Char-les," he said, drily; "everybody who knows that I have brought you out of the wine-husks of iniquity, and the company of harlots; and bid them eat, drink, and be merry."

Perhaps the old man had another reason, not yet clearly analysed. The fine house he had built on the sand-hills sometimes seemed lonely and bare. He often found himself trying to reconstruct, from the grave features of Charles, the little boy whom he but dimly remembered in the past, and of whom lately he had been thinking a great deal. He believed this to be a sign of impending old age and childishness; but coming, one day, in his formal drawing-room, upon a child of one of the servants, who had strayed therein, he would have taken him in his arms, but the child fled from before his grizzled face. So that it seemed eminently proper to invite a number of people to his house, and, from the array of San Francisco maidenhood, to select a daughter-in-law. And then there would be a child—a boy, whom he could "rare up" from the beginning, and—love—as he did not love Charles.

We were all at the party. The Smiths, Joneses, Browns, and Robinsons also came, in that fine flow of animal spirits, unchecked by any respect for the entertainer, which most of us are apt to find so fascinating. The proceedings would have been somewhat riotous, but for the social position of the actors. In fact, Mr. Bracy Tibbets, having naturally a fine appreciation of a humorous situation, but further impelled by the bright eyes of the Jones girls, conducted himself so remarkably as to attract the serious regard of Mr. Charles Thompson, who

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

approached him, saying quietly : " You look ill, Mr. Tibbets ; let me conduct you to your carriage. Resist, you hound, and I'll throw you through that window. This way, please ; the room is close and distressing." It is hardly necessary to say that but a part of this speech was audible to the company, and that the rest was not divulged by Mr. Tibbets, who afterward regretted the sudden illness which kept him from witnessing a certain amusing incident, which the fastest Miss Jones characterized as the " richest part of the blow-out," and which I hasten to record.

It was at supper. It was evident that Mr. Thompson had overlooked much lawlessness in the conduct of the younger people, in his abstract contemplation of some impending event. When the cloth was removed, he rose to his feet, and grimly tapped upon the table. A titter, that broke out among the Jones girls, became epidemic on one side of the board. Charles Thompson, from the foot of the table, looked up in tender perplexity. " He's going to sing a Doxology," " He's going to pray," " Silence for a speech," ran round the room.

" It's one year to-day, Christian brothers and sisters," said Mr. Thompson, with grim deliberation,— " one year to-day since my son came home from eating of wine-husks and spending of his substance on harlots." (The tittering suddenly ceased.) " Look at him now. Charles Thompson, stand up." (Charles Thompson stood up.) " One year ago to-day,—and look at him now."

He was certainly a handsome prodigal, standing there in his cheerful evening-dress,—a repentant prodigal, with sad, obedient eyes turned upon the harsh and unsympathetic glance of his father. The youngest Miss Smith, from the pure depths of her

200

MR. THOMPSON'S PRODIGAL

foolish little heart, moved unconsciously toward him.

"It's fifteen years ago since he left my house," said Mr. Thompson, "a rovier and a prodigal. I was myself a man of sin, O Christian friends,—a man of wrath and bitterness" ("Amen," from the eldest Miss Smith),—"but praise be God, I've fled the wrath to come. It's five years ago since I got the peace that passeth understanding. Have you got it, friends?" (A general sub-chorus of "No, no," from the girls, and "Pass the word for it," from Midshipman Coxe, of the U.S. sloop *Wethersfield*.) "Knock, and it shall be opened to you.

"And when I found the error of my ways, and the preciousness of grace," continued Mr. Thompson, "I came to give it to my son. By sea and land I sought him far and fainted not. I did not wait for him to come to me, which the same I might have done, and justified myself by the Book of books, but I sought him out among his husks, and—" (the rest of the sentence was lost in the rustling withdrawal of the ladies). "Works, Christian friends, is my motto. By their works shall ye know them, and there is mine."

The particular and accepted work to which Mr. Thompson was alluding had turned quite pale, and was looking fixedly toward an open door leading to the veranda, lately filled by gaping servants, and now the scene of some vague tumult. As the noise continued, a man, shabbily dressed, and evidently in liquor, broke through the opposing guardians, and staggered into the room. The transition from the fog and darkness without to the glare and heat within evidently dazzled and stupefied him. He removed his battered hat, and passed it once or twice before his eyes, as he steadied himself, but

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

unsuccessfully, by the back of a chair. Suddenly, his wandering glance fell upon the pale face of Charles Thompson; and with a gleam of childlike recognition, and a weak, falsetto laugh, he darted forward, caught at the table, upset the glasses, and literally fell upon the prodigal's breast.

"Sha'ly! yo' d—d ol' scoun'rel, hoo rar ye!"

"Hush! — sit down! — hush!" said Charles Thompson, hurriedly endeavouring to extricate himself from the embrace of his unexpected guest.

"Look at 'm!" continued the stranger, unheeding the admonition, but suddenly holding the unfortunate Charles at arm's length, in loving and undisguised admiration of his festive appearance. "Look at 'm! Ain't he nasty? Sha'ls, I'm prow of yer!"

"Leave the house!" said Mr. Thompson, rising, with a dangerous look in his cold, grey eye. "Char-les, how dare you?"

"Simmer down, ole man! Shal's, who's th' ol' bloot? Eh?"

"Hush, man; here, take this!" With nervous hands Charles Thompson filled a glass with liquor. "Drink it and go—until to-morrow—any time, but —leave us!—go now!" But even then, ere the miserable wretch could drink, the old man, pale with passion, was upon him. Half carrying him in his powerful arms, half dragging him through the circling crowd of frightened guests, he had reached the door, swung open by the waiting servants, when Charles Thompson started from a seeming stupor, crying,—

"Stop!"

The old man stopped. Through the open door the fog and wind drove chilly. "What does this mean?" he asked, turning a baleful face on Charles.

MR. THOMPSON'S PRODIGAL

"Nothing—but stop—for God's sake. Wait till to-morrow, but not to-night. Do not, I implore you—do this thing."

There was something in the tone of the young man's voice, something, perhaps, in the contact of the struggling wretch he held in his powerful arms; but a dim, indefinite fear took possession of the old man's heart. "Who," he whispered hoarsely, "is this man?"

Charles did not answer.

"Stand back, there, all of you," thundered Mr. Thompson, to the crowding guests around him. "Char-les—come here! I command you—I—I—I—beg you—tell me *who* is this man?"

Only two persons heard the answer that came faintly from the lips of Charles Thompson,—

"YOUR SON."

When day broke over the bleak sand-hills, the guests had departed from Mr. Thompson's banquet-halls. The lights still burned dimly and coldly in the deserted rooms,—deserted by all but three figures, that huddled together in the chill drawing-room, as if for warmth. One lay in drunken slumber on a couch; at his feet sat he who had been known as Charles Thompson; and beside them, haggard and shrunken to half his size, bowed the figure of Mr. Thompson, his grey eye fixed, his elbows upon his knees, and his hands clasped over his ears, as if to shut out the sad, entreating voice that seemed to fill the room.

"God knows I did not set about to wilfully deceive. The name I gave that night was the first that came into my thought,—the name of one whom I thought dead,—the dissolute companion of my shame. And when you questioned further, I used the knowledge that I gained from him to touch your

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

heart to set me free ; only, I swear, for that ! But when you told me who you were, and I first saw the opening of another life before me—then—then—O, sir, if I was hungry, homeless, and reckless, when I would have robbed you of your gold, I was heart-sick, helpless, and desperate, when I would have robbed you of your love !”

The old man stirred not. From his luxurious couch the newly-found prodigal snored peacefully.

“I had no father I could claim. I never knew a home but this. I was tempted. I have been happy, —very happy.”

He rose and stood before the old man.

“Do not fear that I shall come between your son and his inheritance. To-day I leave this place, never to return. The world is large, sir, and, thanks to your kindness, I now see the way by which an honest livelihood is gained. Good-bye. You will not take my hand ? Well, well, good-bye.”

He turned to go. But when he had reached the door he suddenly came back, and, raising with both hands the grizzled head, he kissed it once and twice.

“Char-les !”

There was no reply.

“Char-les !”

The old man rose, with a frightened air, and tottered feebly to the door. It was open. There came to him the awakened tumult of a great city, in which the prodigal's footsteps were lost for ever.

THE POET OF SIERRA FLAT

AS the enterprising editor of the *Sierra Flat Record* stood at his case setting type for his next week's paper, he could not help hearing the woodpeckers who were busy on the roof above his head. It occurred to him that possibly the birds had not yet learned to recognize in the rude structure any improvement on nature, and this idea pleased him so much that he incorporated it in the editorial article which he was then doubly composing. For the editor was also printer of the *Record*; and although that remarkable journal was reputed to exert a power felt through all Calaveras and a greater part of Tuolumne County, strict economy was one of the conditions of its beneficent existence.

Thus preoccupied, he was startled by the sudden irruption of a small roll of manuscript, which was thrown through the open door and fell at his feet. He walked quickly to the threshold and looked down the tangled trail which led to the high road. But there was nothing to suggest the presence of his mysterious contributor. A hare limped slowly away, a green-and-gold lizard paused upon a pine-stump, the woodpeckers ceased their work. So complete had been his sylvan seclusion that he found it difficult to connect any human agency with the act; rather the hare seemed to have an inexpressibly guilty look, the woodpeckers to maintain a significant silence, and the lizard to be conscience-stricken into stone.

An examination of the manuscript, however, corrected this injustice to defenceless nature. It was evidently of human origin,—being verse, and of exceeding bad quality. The editor laid it aside. As he did so he thought he saw a face at the window.

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

Sallying out in some indignation, he penetrated the surrounding thicket in every direction, but his search was as fruitless as before. The poet, if it were he, was gone.

A few days after this the editorial seclusion was invaded by voices of alternate expostulation and entreaty. Stepping to the door, the editor was amazed at beholding Mr. Morgan McCorkle, a well-known citizen of Angelo, and a subscriber to the *Record* in the act of urging, partly by force and partly by argument, an awkward young man toward the building. When he had finally effected his object, and, as it were, safely landed his prize in a chair, Mr. McCorkle took off his hat, carefully wiped the narrow isthmus of forehead which divided his black brows from his stubby hair, and with an explanatory wave of his hand toward his reluctant companion, said, "A borned poet, and the cussedest fool you ever seed!"

Accepting the editor's smile as a recognition of the introduction, Mr. McCorkle panted and went on: "Didn't want to come! 'Mister Editor don't want to see me, Morg,' sez he. 'Milt,' sez I, 'he do; a borned poet like you and a gifted genius like he oughter come together sociable!' And I fetched him. Ah, will yer?" The born poet had, after exhibiting signs of great distress, started to run. But McCorkle was down upon him instantly, seizing him by his long linen coat, and settled him back in his chair. "'Tain't no use stampeding. Yer ye are and yer ye stays. For yer a borned poet,—ef ye are as shy as a jackass rabbit. Look at 'im now!"

He certainly was not an attractive picture. There was hardly a notable feature in his weak face except his eyes, which were moist and shy and not

THE POET OF SIERRA FLAT

unlike the animal to which McCorkle had compared him. It was the face that the editor had seen at the window.

"Knowed him for fower year,—since he war a boy," continued Mr. McCorkle in a loud whisper. "Allers the same, bless you! Can jerk a rhyme as easy as turnin' jack. Never had any eddication; lived out in Missooray all his life. But he's chock full o' poetry. On'y this mornin' sez I to him,—he camps along o' me,—'Milt,' sez I, 'are breakfast ready?' and he up and answers back quite peart and chipper, 'The breakfast it is ready, and the birds is singing free, and it's risin' in the dawnin' light is happiness to me!' When a man," said Mr. McCorkle, dropping his voice with deep solemnity, "gets off things like them, without any call to do it, and handlin' flapjacks over a cookstove at the same time,—that man's a borned poet."

There was an awkward pause. Mr. McCorkle beamed patronizingly on his *protégé*. The born poet looked as if he were meditating another flight,—not a metaphorical one. The editor asked if he could do anything for them.

"In course you can," responded Mr. McCorkle, "that's jest it. Milt, where's that poetry?"

The editor's countenance fell as the poet produced from his pocket a roll of manuscript. He, however, took it mechanically and glanced over it. It was evidently a duplicate of the former mysterious contribution.

The editor then spoke briefly but earnestly. I regret that I cannot recall his exact words, but it appeared that never before, in the history of the *Record*, had the pressure been so great upon its columns. Matters of paramount importance, deeply affecting the material progress of Sierra, questions

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

touching the absolute integrity of Calaveras and Tuolumne as social communities, were even now waiting expression. Weeks, nay, months, must elapse before that pressure would be removed, and the *Record* could grapple with any but the sternest of topics. Again, the editor had noticed with pain the absolute decline of poetry in the foot-hills of the Sierras. Even the works of Byron and Moore attracted no attention in Dutch Flat, and a prejudice seemed to exist against Tennyson in Grass Valley. But the editor was not without hope for the future. In the course of four or five years, when the country was settled,——

“What would be the cost to print this yer?” interrupted Mr. McCorkle, quietly.

“About fifty dollars as an advertisement,” responded the editor with cheerful alacrity.

Mr. McCorkle placed the sum in the editor's hand. “Yer see thet's what I sez to Milt, ‘Milt,’ sez I, ‘pay as you go, for you are a borned poet. Hevin’ no call to write, but doin’ it free and spontaneous like, in course you pays. Thet’s why Mr. Editor never printed your poetry.”

“What name shall I put to it?” asked the editor.
“Milton.”

It was the first word that the born poet had spoken during the interview, and his voice was so very sweet and musical that the editor looked at him curiously, and wondered if he had a sister.

“Milton; is that all?”

“Thet’s his furst name,” exclaimed Mr. McCorkle.

The editor here suggested that as there had been another poet of that name——

“Milt might be took for him! Thet’s bad,” reflected Mr. McCorkle with simple gravity. “Well, put down his hull name,—Milton Chubbuck.”

THE POET OF SIERRA FLAT

The editor made a note of the fact. "I'll set it up now," he said. This was also a hint that the interview was ended. The poet and patron, arm in arm, drew towards the door. "In next week's paper," said the editor, smilingly, in answer to the childlike look of inquiry in the eyes of the poet, and in another moment they were gone.

The editor was as good as his word. He straightway betook himself to his case, and, unrolling the manuscript, began his task. The woodpeckers on the roof recommenced theirs, and in a few moments the former sylvan seclusion was restored. There was no sound in the barren, barn-like room but the birds above, and below the click of the composing-rule as the editor marshalled the types into lines in his stick, and arrayed them in solid column on the galley. Whatever might have been his opinion of the copy before him, there was no indication of it in his face, which wore the stolid indifference of his craft. Perhaps this was unfortunate, for as the day wore on and the level rays of the sun began to pierce the adjacent thicket, they sought out and discovered an anxious ambushed figure drawn up beside the editor's window,—a figure that had sat there motionless for hours. Within, the editor worked on as steadily and impassively as Fate. And without, the born poet of Sierra Flat sat and watched him as waiting its decree.

The effect of the poem on Sierra Flat was remarkable and unprecedented. The absolute villainess of its doggerel, the gratuitous imbecility of its thought, and above all the crowning audacity of the fact that it was the work of a citizen and published in the county paper, brought it instantly into popularity. For many months Calaveras had languished for a sensation; since the last vigilance committee

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

nothing had transpired to dispel the listless *ennui* begotten of stagnant business and growing civilization. In more prosperous moments the office of the *Record* would have been simply gutted and the editor deported; at present the paper was in such demand that the edition was speedily exhausted. In brief, the poem of Mr. Milton Chubbuck came like a special providence to Sierra Flat. It was read by camp-fires, in lonely cabins, in flaring bar-rooms, and noisy saloons, and declaimed from the boxes of stage-coaches. It was sung in Poker Flat with the addition of a local chorus, and danced as an unhallowed rhythmic dance by the Pyrrhic phalanx of One Horse Gulch, known as "The Festive Stags of Calaveras." Some unhappy ambiguities of expression gave rise to many new readings, notes, and commentaries, which, I regret to state, were more often marked by ingenuity than delicacy of thought or expression.

Never before did poet acquire such sudden local reputation. From the seclusion of McCorkle's cabin and the obscurity of culinary labours, he was haled forth into the glowing sunshine of Fame. The name of Chubbuck was written in letters of chalk on unpainted walls, and carved with a pick on the sides of tunnels. A drink known variously as "The Chubbuck Tranquilizer," or "The Chubbuck Exalter," was dispensed at the bars. For some weeks a rude design for a Chubbuck statue, made up of illustrations from circus and melodeon posters, representing the genius of Calaveras in brief skirts on a flying steed in the act of crowning the poet Chubbuck, was visible at Keeler's Ferry. The poet himself was overborne with invitations to drink and extravagant congratulations. The meeting between Colonel Starbottle of Siskiyou and Chubbuck, as previously arranged by our "Boston," late of Roaring
210

THE POET OF SIERRA FLAT

Camp, is said to have been indescribably affecting. The Colonel embraced him unsteadily. "I could not return to my constituents at Siskiyou, sir, if this hand, which has grasped that of the gifted Prentice and the lamented Poe, should not have been honoured by the touch of the godlike Chubbuck. Gentlemen, American literature is looking up. Thank you, I will take sugar in mine." It was "Boston" who indited letters of congratulations from H. W. Longfellow, Tennyson, and Browning, to Mr. Chubbuck, deposited them in the Sierra Flat post-office, and obligingly consented to dictate the replies.

The simple faith and unaffected delight with which these manifestations were received by the poet and his patron might have touched the hearts of these grim masters of irony, but for the sudden and equal development in both of the variety of weak natures. Mr. McCorkle basked in the popularity of his *protégé*, and became alternately supercilious or patronizing toward the dwellers of Sierra Flat; while the poet, with hair carefully oiled and curled, and bedecked with cheap jewellery and flaunting neck-handkerchief, paraded himself before the single hotel. As may be imagined, this new disclosure of weakness afforded intense satisfaction to Sierra Flat, gave another lease of popularity to the poet, and suggested another idea to the facetious "Boston."

At that time a young lady popularly and professionally known as the "California Pet," was performing to enthusiastic audiences in the interior. Her speciality lay in the personation of youthful masculine character; as a *gamin* of the street she was irresistible, as a negro-dancer she carried the honest miners' hearts by storm. A saucy, pretty

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

brunette, she had preserved a wonderful moral reputation even under the Jove-like advances of showers of gold that greeted her appearance on the stage at Sierra Flat. A prominent and delighted member of that audience was Milton Chubbuck. He attended every night. Every day he lingered at the door of the Union Hotel for a glimpse of the "California Pet." It was not long before he received a note from her,—in "Boston's" most popular and approved female hand,—acknowledging his admiration. It was not long before "Boston" was called upon to indite a suitable reply. At last, in furtherance of his facetious design, it became necessary for "Boston" to call upon the young actress herself and secure her personal participation. To her he unfolded a plan, the successful carrying out of which he felt would secure his fame to posterity as a practical humorist. The "California Pet's" black eyes sparkled approvingly and mischievously. She only stipulated that she should see the man first,—a concession to her feminine weakness which years of dancing Juba and wearing trousers and boots had not wholly eradicated from her wilful breast. By all means, it should be done. And the interview was arranged for the next week.

It must not be supposed that during this interval of popularity Mr. Chubbuck had been unmindful of his poetic qualities. A certain portion of each day he was absent from town,—“a communin’ with natur’” as Mr. McCorkle expressed it,—and actually wandering in the mountain trails, or lying on his back under the trees, or gathering fragrant herbs and the bright-coloured berries of the Marzanita. These and his company he generally brought to the editor's office, late in the afternoon, often to that enterprising journalist's weariness. Quiet and

212

THE POET OF SIERRA FLAT

uncommunicative, he would sit there patiently watching him at his work until the hour for closing the office arrived, when he would as quietly depart. There was something so humble and unobtrusive in these visits, that the editor could not find it in his heart to deny them, and accepting them, like the woodpeckers, as a part of his sylvan surroundings, often forgot even his presence. Once or twice, moved by some beauty of expression in the moist, shy eyes, he felt like seriously admonishing his visitor of his idle folly; but his glance falling upon the oiled hair and the gorgeous necktie, he invariably thought better of it. The case was evidently hopeless.

The interview between Mr. Chubbuck and the "California Pet" took place in a private room of the Union Hotel; propriety being respected by the presence of that arch-humorist, "Boston." To this gentleman we are indebted for the only true account of the meeting. However reticent Mr. Chubbuck might have been in the presence of his own sex, toward the fairer portion of humanity he was, like most poets, exceedingly voluble. Accustomed as the "California Pet" had been to excessive compliment, she was fairly embarrassed by the extravagant praises of her visitor. Her personation of boy characters, her dancing of the "champion jig," were particularly dwelt upon with fervid but unmistakable admiration. At last, recovering her audacity and emboldened by the presence of "Boston," the "California Pet" electrified her hearers by demanding, half jestingly, half viciously, if it were as a boy or a girl that she was the subject of his flattering admiration.

"That knocked him out o' time," said the delighted "Boston," in his subsequent account of the interview. "But do you believe the d—d fool

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

actually asked her to take him with her ; wanted to engage in the company."

The plan, as briefly unfolded by "Boston," was to prevail on Mr. Chubbuck to make his appearance in costume (already designed and prepared by the inventor) before a Sierra Flat audience, and recite an original poem at the Hall immediately on the conclusion of the "California Pet's" performance. At a given signal the audience were to rise and deliver a volley of unsavoury articles (previously provided by the originator of the scheme); then a select few were to rush on the stage, seize the poet, and, after marching him in triumphal procession through town, were to deposit him beyond its uttermost limits, with strict injunctions never to enter it again. To the first part of the plan the poet was committed, for the latter portion it was easy enough to find participants.

The eventful night came, and with it an audience that packed the long narrow room with one dense mass of human beings. The "California Pet" never had been so joyous, so reckless, so fascinating and audacious before. But the applause was tame and weak compared to the ironical outburst that greeted the second rising of the curtain and the entrance of the born poet of Sierra Flat. Then there was a hush of expectancy, and the poet stepped to the foot-lights and stood with his manuscript in his hand.

His face was deadly pale. Either there was some suggestion of his fate in the faces of his audience, or some mysterious instinct told him of his danger. He attempted to speak, but faltered, tottered, and staggered to the wings.

Fearful of losing his prey, "Boston" gave the signal, and leaped upon the stage. But at the same moment a light figure darted from behind the scenes,

THE POET OF SIERRA FLAT

and delivering a kick that sent the discomfited humorist back among the musicians, cut a pigeon-wing, executed a double-shuffle, and then advancing to the foot-lights with that inimitable look, that audacious swagger and utter *abandon* which had so thrilled and fascinated them a moment before, uttered the characteristic speech: "Wot are you goin' to hit a man fur, when he's down, s-a-a-y?"

The look, the drawl, the action, the readiness, and above all the downright courage of the little woman, had its effect. A roar of sympathetic applause followed the act. "Cut and run while you can," she whispered hurriedly over one shoulder, without altering the other's attitude of pert and saucy defiance toward the audience. But even as she spoke the poet tottered and sank fainting upon the stage. Then she threw a despairing whisper behind the scenes, "ring down the curtain."

There was a slight movement of opposition in the audience, but among them rose the burly shoulders of Yuba Bill, the tall, erect figure of Henry York, of Sandy Bar, and the colourless, determined face of John Oakhurst. The curtain came down.

Behind it knelt the "California Pet" beside the prostrate poet. "Bring me some water. Run for a doctor. Stop!! CLEAR OUT, ALL OF YOU!"

She had loosened the gaudy cravat and opened the shirt collar of the insensible figure before her. Then she burst into an hysterical laugh.

"Manuela!"

Her tiring-woman, a Mexican half-breed, came toward her.

"Help me with him to my dressing-room, quick; then stand outside and wait. If any one questions you, tell them he's gone. Do you hear? HE'S gone."

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

The old woman did as she was bade. In a few moments the audience had departed. Before morning so also had the "California Pet," Manuela, and—the poet of Sierra Flat.

But, alas! with them also had departed the fair fame of the "California Pet." Only a few, and these it is to be feared of not the best moral character themselves, still had faith in the stainless honour of their favourite actress. "It was a mighty foolish thing to do, but it'll all come out right yet." On the other hand, a majority gave her full credit and approbation for her undoubted pluck and gallantry, but deplored that she should have thrown it away upon a worthless object. To elect for a lover the despised and ridiculed vagrant of Sierra Flat, who had not even the manliness to stand up in his own defence, was not only evidence of inherent moral depravity, but was an insult to the community. Colonel Starbottle saw in it only another instance of the extreme frailty of the sex; he had known similar cases; and remembered distinctly, sir, how a well-known Philadelphia heiress, one of the finest women that ever rode in her kerridge, that, gad, sir! had thrown over a Southern member of Congress to consort with a d—d nigger. The Colonel had also noticed a singular look in the dog's eye which he did not entirely fancy. He would not say anything against the lady, sir, but he had noticed—And here haply the Colonel became so mysterious and darkly confidential as to be unintelligible and inaudible to the bystanders.

A few days after the disappearance of Mr. Chubbuck a singular report reached Sierra Flat, and it was noticed that "Boston," who since the failure of his elaborate joke had been even more depressed in spirits than is habitual with great humorists,

216

THE POET OF SIERRA FLAT

suddenly found that his presence was required in San Francisco. But as yet nothing but the vaguest surmises were afloat, and nothing definite was known.

It was a pleasant afternoon when the editor of the *Sierra Flat Record* looked up from his case and beheld the figure of Mr. Morgan McCorkle standing in the doorway. There was a distressed look on the face of that worthy gentleman that at once enlisted the editor's sympathizing attention. He held an open letter in his hand, as he advanced toward the middle of the room.

"As a man as has allers borne a fair reputation," began Mr. McCorkle slowly, "I should like, if so be as I could, Mister Editor, to make a correction in the columns of your valooable paper."

Mr. Editor begged him to proceed.

"Ye may not disremember that about a month ago I fetched here what so be as we'll call a young man whose name might be as it were Milton—Milton Chubbuck."

Mr. Editor remembered perfectly.

"Thet same party I'd knowed better nor fower year, two on 'em campin' out together. Not that I'd known him all the time, fur he war shy and strange at spells and had odd ways that I took war nat'ral to a borned poet. Ye may remember that I said he was a borned poet?"

The Editor distinctly did.

"I picked this same party up in St. Jo., takin' a fancy to his face, and kinder calklating he'd runn'd away from home,—for I'm a married man, Mr. Editor, and hev children of my own,—and thinkin' belike he was a borned poet."

"Well?" said the editor.

"And as I said before, I should like now to make

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE TALES

a correction in the columns of your valooable paper."

"What correction?" asked the editor.

"I said, ef you remember my words, as how he was a borned poet."

"Yes."

"From statements in this yer letter it seems as how I war wrong."

"Well?"

"She war a woman."



